Bestseller Mystery

BULLETS for a BLONDE

(DEPARTURE DELAYED)

BY Will Oursler

"High grade thriller."
SATURDAY REVIEW OF LITERATURE

ABRIDGED EDITION

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WILL OURSLER

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LAWRENCE E. SPIVAK
Publisher

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Bestseller Mystery, No. B110

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JOSEPH W. FERMAN, *General Manager*

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CHAPTER ONE

THE subway train lurched. My head spun like a kid's pinwheel. I was afraid I'd pitch forward. The train jolted to a stop. "Thirty-Third Street-Pennsylvania Station." I could read it through the window. People got off and got on. Doors closed. We were moving again.

Questions came. Grotesque, impossible questions normal people didn't have to ask. What was I doing here? Where was I going? They tumbled over in my brain. Why are you here? Why are you riding in this subway now? It was as if I were just returning to consciousness. . . .

I knew my name. Roy Marshall. Sergeant Roy Marshall. Twenty-six years old. You were overseas in a Ranger outfit. Serial number 1-457-387 — no, that wasn't correct but it was close. You're from Ohio. Where your home is. Where your mother and dad are.

The hospital began to cross my thoughts, confused, mixed up fragments I had to put together. Nurses and Red Cross girls and white uniforms. People crowding around me at the hospital door. People singing, "Happy home-going to you — happy home-going to you —"

How long ago was that?

The train was starting again. The woman next to me had her elbow dug into my side.

I'd left the hospital. I'd still been in khaki when I left. I remembered that. Now I looked down. I was wearing a gray overcoat.

I was fuzzy and weak. Panic ran through me. I felt a stabbing pain in my shoulder. Where had I boarded this train? I didn't even know that much.

I had to get off the train. I had to find some place where I could sit down. I wondered what time it was. I lifted my free hand to look at my watch. The watch was gone.

The train was stopping. This was Fifty-Ninth Street — Columbus Circle. I didn't know New York well. I'd spent furloughs in the city, back when I was first in the Army. You learned New York the way servicemen learn any strange city — subways and buses, streets where you pick up girls.

Still at Columbus Circle. I had to get off. I pushed through the crowd in the car. Somebody held the door open and I got out to the station platform.

It was more than an impulse. I almost felt I was supposed to get off. Get upstairs. Get yourself a drink.

I reached in my pocket and felt some coins.

It was dusk outside. Dusk and cold with flurries of snow blowing along the streets. I hadn't been in this part of town often. I wasn't sure of direction. Yet I seemed to know where to go. I got to the sidewalk, walked around the corner and up a side street. A short distance ahead I saw a red and yellow neon sign: "Hi Jinks Bar." I was certain I'd been here before.

I went inside. It was cramped and stuffy. A couple of men sat at a table in a corner, drinking beer. Behind the bar was a small bald-headed man in a dirty white apron. He glanced up and grinned. He said: "Hello, Mr. Wilson.

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What'll it be?"

I looked at him a moment without answering. This man thought he knew me. This little bald-headed bartender. Mr. Wilson, he called me. The name struck a harsh, jangling chord.

Chalk up one for the subconscious. I'd been right. I had been here before.

I tried to sound casual. "Make it a double Scotch," I said. "Don't mix it. Water on the side."

He seemed puzzled. Then he said: "Sure. Sure. Coming right up."

I watched him pour the drink. As he handed it to me, he asked, "Where's the lady?"

I took a quick gulp of the Scotch, felt its warmth inside me. "I — I'm drinking alone," I told him.

"I get it," he said. "Time off for good behavior. But that's a good girl. Got class."

I didn't answer. The bartender — the girl he spoke of — they were part of the big missing world after the hospital. I was like a man who blacked out. Waking up. Waking up in a subway train.

I went back to the first time. I hadn't remembered anything then until I came to on the *Solus* — the hospital ship — two days out of San Francisco. Woke up with a nurse bending over me and asking, "What's your name, Sergeant?" I told her it was Marshall and she gasped, ran out of the ward and came back with two doctors. They acted pleased. They told me later they'd given me a new shock treatment to try to straighten me out and it seemed to have worked.

The thing had happened in China. That was a special deal — one you didn't read about in the papers. We were bringing in supplies for the underground — Chinese guerrillas working behind Jap lines, operating the escape route to Kwoming. That was how American flyers shot down over Asia had a chance to get back alive.

They had to have supplies. Rations and clothes and guns the guerrillas could give to our fellows. Somebody had to bring the supplies in. They called for volunteers in our outfit. Ten of us. We'd go in by submarine — you surface at night off shore and paddle to the beach in a rubber raft. I told them sure, I'd go. You have to. You know plenty of lives depend on it.

I got the rough end of that show. I didn't like it. There was a man they called Downes. Nobody knew his nationality. He'd work for anybody with the price. They said before the war he dealt in narcotics. He had contacts with the Chinese so he was helpful to the Japs in putting the finger on guerrillas. Already he'd turned in over fifty.

G-2 said he was a threat we had to destroy. Twice they'd tried to get him and he'd shot his way out. This time they weren't taking chances. A Chinese girl was luring him to a shack near the beach where we were landing. One of us was supposed to go up there to the shack. . . .

I'd killed men before in hand to hand fighting. This was different. It was more cold blooded. It was almost like murder. But somebody had to do it.

I got through to the shack all right. There was dense growth around the place. I stood about five feet from the house. It was daylight then. I could make out the man and the guerrilla girl inside. There was another window on the other side. The man was

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ilhouetted against it. I could see his rofile, the repulsive, clownish outline f the large nose and receding chin.

I stepped forward and raised the automatic. He must have spotted me at hat instant. I saw him dodge back. He eached out and grabbed for something. t was the girl, the little Chinese guerilla.

My finger was pressing the trigger. It was too late. He had her as a shield n front of him. I couldn't miss. I heard he shot, heard the girl scream.

I stood motionless. Once when I was a kid I accidentally smashed a vase. This was like that. You stood there, frozen. I knew I should have ducked for cover but I didn't.

It was only a moment. Then he fired. I seemed to hear and feel the shot at the same second. A jolting, paralyzing, wet sensation at my temples. Round globules of color swimming in before my eyes. I tried to let out a cry.

I didn't actually "come to" until that day on the *Solus*. That was a whole month later. The nurses told me I'd been conscious during that month but I didn't remember. They said all that time I'd been saying my name was John Wilson.

I understood but I couldn't explain it to them. Going into China, we used make-up names in dealing with the underground people. That was for security. If we used real names and they leaked back to the Japs, it might have helped the bastards figure out what our outfit was, where we based and how we operated.

I took the name John Wilson. I remembered an old story about a John Wilson who found a secret gold mine and became rich but nobody knew where the mine was and John Wilson never told. They said when he died, at ninety-four, he grinned up at relatives gathered around the death bed, shook his head and passed on. So I took that name.

'Mr. Wilson,' the bartender had said. I wanted to ask him questions but I knew I couldn't. Not directly. I had enough change in the coat pocket for another drink. I shoved the empty glass toward him and he filled it up.

Some of the fellows had come to see me in the hospital in San Francisco. They told me the girl guerrilla had died. I'd killed her. I hadn't meant to but I'd done it.

The outfit on the beach had worried when I didn't come back on time. They sent out a searching party. When they got to the shack, it was too late to do anything for the girl. They found me lying outside on the ground, shot in the head. There wasn't any sign of Downes. They carried me back to the hiding place and that night took me out in a raft to the sub that came to pick us up.

Mother and Dad had come to see me in the hospital while I was in San Francisco. They'd stayed a few days. Then the Army sent me to Halloran in New York for specialist treatment.

The last weeks at Halloran, they'd let me go into the city a few times. Sent us out in groups of ten or fifteen. The medics said it was occupational therapy for convalescents. We spent those afternoons doing odd jobs at Army G-2 storerooms in a loft building on West 44th Street.

The job they gave me those times was taking inventory. I remembered writing down long lists. Portable radio

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equipment. Photo supplies. New type dictaphones which make sound records on film. Weeks ago, that was. Weeks or months. You didn't know. In between was the gaping hole.

There was a newspaper lying on the bar. The date was February 21. I kept trying to remember what the day was when they let me out of the hospital in New York. It was a couple of months after the Japs gave up. I seemed to recall it was some time in November.

That would have made it over three months. Where were my parents? They would have tried to reach me. The police would be trying to find me.

Fear crept in. I didn't know what people I'd been with, what I'd been doing. Doctors said even with head injuries, you weren't likely to try anything that went against your basic character. I'd read that in a book in the hospital. But who knew your basic character? For three years they'd been teaching me how to kill.

The two fellows in the corner paid their check and went out. The place was hot. I looked in the mirror that ran the length of the bar but my own reflection seemed blurred.

The little bartender was polishing glasses but he kept watching me. Finally he said, "You look like you seen a ghost."

I said, "Maybe I have."

Then I decided to make a try. "Tell me something," I asked. "When was I in here last? Was it yesterday?"

It was a blind stab. But the man said: "Sure it was. Yesterday afternoon. With the girl."

He seemed to be trying to figure it out. Finally he grinned. "I get it. You and the girl had a fight last night and you got yourself plastered."

It was a lead I hadn't thought o "Yeah," I said quickly. "That's wh happened. I got lousy drunk. Whol thing's a blank. We start the argumer here?"

He lowered his voice. "Wouldn't cal it exactly an argument. She was up set about something. Kept sayin she hadn't meant to see you again. Sh was upset about a phone call from som girl —"

He stopped. His expression was wor ried. "You don't look right."

I could feel my whole body sweatin but I tried to grin. "What do yo mean?"

"It ain't just a hangover," he insisted "You look like you're in trouble."

I stood up, grabbed the stool a sec ond for support. I took off the gray slouch hat I was wearing. There were wet drops of perspiration on my fore head. I started to take off the gray coat. I saw the man's eyes widen. I said, "What the hell's the matter with you?"

He said, "With you, you mean. Look at yourself."

I looked in the mirror. I could make out I was wearing a blue suit. The coat was open. The white shirt was smeared crimson. I stared at the reflection, trying to tell myself it wasn't so.

I knew it was blood. I put my hand to where my shoulder hurt and it was wet and sticky.

The bartender said, "I don't know what you're mixed up in. But you got yourself shot. Shot or stabbed or something. If you need a croaker there's a fellow next door — up one flight. But I don't want any jam in here. I want you to get out. Get out before I call the police."

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CHAPTER TWO

THE doctor's office was one room in the rear. He was a bushy-haired, thick-set refugee named Gertz. He wore a white coat. The hair was graying at the edges.

I told him I was in trouble. I said I'd been drunk and I didn't remember what had happened but I thought I'd been stabbed or shot in some kind of brawl.

He nodded, waved a pudgy hand. "The coat — take off the coat."

I stripped down to the waist. He made me lie on the examination table. The wound was in my left shoulder. He probed it with his fingers and it hurt and I swore.

"All right," he said. "It is not anything much. Not bad. The blood — it formed the clot — does not bleed now. Only seeping."

I could tell from the way he worked that he knew his business. The hands moved swiftly, dexterously. "It is not bad," he half muttered, "not bad." There was a faint smile on his lips. There was something kindly about him.

"Rest, of course," he said. "You should have three — four — days in bed."

The job was nearly finished. He was preparing a bandage. "You were shot," he said, almost as if talking to himself. "But the bullet only cut the flesh. It did not lodge inside. You were lucky — lucky. A little lower — a little to the right —"

I said, "I don't know if I have money to pay you now. But I will pay. I'll send it to you."

His manner was imperturbable. "You do not remember," he asked, "how it happened? You have no idea where you were?"

I shook my head. "No idea."

I lay there on the table looking up at the ceiling. The doctor was across the room. I heard the water running and guessed he was washing his hands.

The doctor asked, "What is your name?"

"Marshall," I said. "Sergeant Roy Marshall."

I heard him suck in breath. "That is not what it says in your pocket." His words were slow.

I lifted myself up. He was not washing his hands. He had been examining the pockets of the blue suit. I'd intended doing that myself back at the bar — but the trouble started with the bartender and there wasn't time.

"Who do you think you are?" I demanded. "The Gestapo? This is America. This —"

He lifted his hand. "I worked with some of the underground in Austria. I know about people running away. I helped them. I knew the police — political police — swine. Then — I had to run from them myself!"

He seemed to think that was a special, ironic little joke. "That was in my sick Austria. It is not the same here in America. Here — when a man is running away — when he is frightened —"

"He must be a gangster," I snapped. "Or something worse."

His expression was almost hurt. He had an air of patience. I got the feeling he had seen too much trouble. It was an old story.

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"The billfold," he said, "belongs to a Mr. Wilson."

The words cut into me. He had gone through the wallet, of course. Hurriedly, at any rate.

"Let me see it," I said. "Let me see everything in the pockets."

I swung my feet to the floor. I was so groggy I almost fell. He was fumbling in the pockets. He turned, calmly handed me the brown-leather wallet and a little batch of crumpled papers.

"Here you are," he told me. "After you read them — you tell me where you got them."

I was shaking as I took them. The name John Wilson was on the inside of the billfold in gold lettering. The wallet also held three dollars. On the identification card was the name "John Wilson" and a scribbled address 34-42 Second Avenue.

The other papers — out of the pockets — had little meaning to me. There was an engraved invitation to the opening of some art exhibit on 57th Street. A bill from some laundry on Columbus Avenue. Several slips of paper had notes I couldn't make out well — smudged, penciled scrawlings. It looked like my writing. The one I made out best had some illegible name and beneath that "Park Towers Hotel."

I wanted to blurt out as much as I knew. I wanted to ask him for help. I was afraid.

Anything could have happened in those weeks. If I was in trouble, I'd have to tell them I simply didn't recall. I wasn't myself — I was somebody else. That was the truth but maybe they wouldn't believe it. Even if they check with the Army medics, the authorities might say I was lying.

Dr. Gertz watched as I started putting on my shirt. He gave me help with the sore shoulder. As I started buttoning up the shirt he said, "I'm going to have to make a report."

I knew he meant the police. "*Have to?*"

He shrugged. "In all matters like this, that is the law."

"I haven't done anything wrong," I said. "— I —"

"In such cases, you have nothing to be afraid. Police in this country are not like those Nazis were. You will have your hearing —"

"I don't want any hearing. But I've got to —"

"You have to contact your friends — and find out what you did — while you were drinking?"

"No," I said. "Not that. Not exactly that, anyway. It's simply —"

"My boy," he said, "I wish I could help you. I must do what the law says. I am sorry. It is — not good. But we cannot get away by running. You must face what it is."

I had to get the facts. They were what I had to face. I had to know. Before anything else. I had to find out for myself.

He turned slowly, opened the door, went out into the hall. It was shadowy there, but I could see him shuffling to a corner. I heard him drop a nickel into the pay phone.

I was putting on the coat to the blue suit. It was troublesome with the shoulder. But I buttoned it quickly, stuffed the papers and billfold into my pocket. I grabbed the gray coat and the hat.

I could hear him on the phone: "Headquarters? Hello? It is Dr. Her-

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mann Gertz speaking. I am on 58th Street. Yes. I wish to make a report. I have just treated a man who —"

I decided not to wait. I sneaked out into the hall. The doctor was still talking; he had not heard me.

I hurried down the short flight of stairs, pushed open the door and out into the night.

The house on Second Avenue was in a block of crowded, poverty-ridden tenements. I had stopped on the way for a sandwich and a cup of coffee in a cafeteria and I felt better.

It was a three floor, old fashioned walkup. I looked over the names on the mailboxes. Then I saw it — plainly written — in my own handwriting: JOHN WILSON APARTMENT 3C.

Instinctively I pressed the bell. I almost laughed out loud as I did that. That's you, I told myself. Don't you realize that, you stupid bastard. John Wilson is you. You're not in. You're just coming to pay a call on yourself.

But I was wrong. There was a clicking sound. Someone upstairs was pressing a buzzer. The front door was opening. I watched an instant, fascinated. Someone was up there — someone in Mr. John Wilson's apartment.

I pushed the door in, started up the narrow stairs. They were covered with worn, rotting linoleum. The halls were dingy and badly lit. There was an odor of onions cooking. I got up the first floor, looking at the numbers on the doors, kept on going.

Apartment 3C was on the top floor. The door was closed. I walked over to it. For a second I hesitated, then I knocked, trying to make it sound brisk and assured. I heard a woman's voice telling me to come in.

I put my hand on the knob. The door swung open.

It was a small, brightly lighted room, overcrowded with cheap furniture. The place was in disorder.

A girl was there. She was lounging in an armchair near the window, a dyed blonde with thin, sharp features. Her eyes were brown and large and intense and her lips had too much paint. Her legs were over the arm of the chair and the black dress had ridden above her knees.

The lips parted when she saw me. She looked almost shocked. But if she was, she recovered quickly and laughed — high, gay laughter that didn't sound real.

"So they missed? And here I was hoping —" She hesitated. "No — I didn't mean it, Johnny. I didn't mean that. Come here, dope. Come over here."

CHAPTER THREE

I CAME into the room slowly. I had to play a game, at least for this time. The girl before me had answers I wanted. I took each step toward her slowly, like an actor trying a part he doesn't know. As I reached the chair her arms went up and dragged me down beside her. Her lips were wet against mine.

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The kiss wasn't fun. I didn't like this girl. I wanted to pull away from her. She must have caught my reaction. She drew away from me, almost angrily.

"What's the matter?" she demanded.

I stood up, walked to the center of the room. There was a pack of cigarettes on the table and I picked up one and lit it.

She attempted to smile but the smile faded quickly. She said, "Johnny — something happened, didn't it? I know. I know from how you're acting. They did try. They tried to — to —"

The tone was startling. There was terror in her voice. It was as if she were saying: *They tried to kill you.* I looked into those large, dark eyes. I was certain I was right. I said, "You mean — did they get a pot shot?"

"Johnny," she said, "they —"

So there wasn't any doubt. I said lightly, "Sure — they tried."

She leaned her head back and closed her eyes. The blond hair fell to her neck. There was something pathetic about her. She said: "This time — they missed."

"Not quite. They grazed me. Here." I pointed to the shoulder. The thing still throbbed. "Not serious."

She let out a little whimpering sound of sympathy. "You wouldn't believe me," she said. "If you'd done what I wanted — if we'd gotten away — Johnny, we could have been half way across the country by now. We could have been safe."

"We're not safe now?" I asked. "You think they'll try again?"

It was surprising how calmly I could ask that. I was still playing a part. None of what was happening actually seemed real. Whatever trouble Johnny Wilson was in — whoever was trying to harm him — it couldn't hurt me, Roy Marshall.

But of course it could. I couldn't get away from the facts. I was Johnny Wilson. I was the guy they — somebody — wanted to kill.

She sat up straight in the chair. "Sure they'll try again. He will. He'll keep on trying. I want to get away, Johnny. Let's get out now."

The girl was almost sobbing. In spite of her tinsel I knew it wasn't a gag. This part of it she meant. The fear in the eyes was real.

"I can't go away," I told her. "I've got a lot of things to find out first."

She settled back in the chair again. "That's the trouble. You're wilder even than I am. You just don't give a damn if you live or get killed. That's why you go sticking your nose into other people's business —"

"What other people's business?" I demanded.

"His, for one. You should have known better. You wouldn't expect him to do nothing. You're a dumb bunny. You could get away now. But you won't go —"

She bounced out of the chair. She was smaller than me by several inches. She had slipped off her shoes and she padded across the room in her stocking feet. She picked up a watch on the table. It was my watch, the one dad and mother gave me before I went overseas, the one missing from my wrist.

"It's almost nine," she said. "I've got to get down to the club. I'm on at ten-thirty. I've been waiting here for hours, Johnny. For you. I wanted to be sure — nothing happened."

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She sounded like a little girl telling a lie. I found my thoughts running along beside her words: This part you don't mean, sister. This part is fake. But I said, "Now you can put the worries to bed."

"You don't believe me," she complained. "Honest, I had to know you were all right. When you decided to go down there — so insistent —" She stopped abruptly. "I've got to get going. I can't be late."

There was a mirror over the mantel and she stood before it, daubing rouge on her face, running a comb through the hair. She slipped on her shoes.

Her black, imitation fur coat was lying on the cot and she picked it up and started to put it on. I stepped across the room and helped her. She looked up smiling and said, "Why, Johnny, I didn't imagine you cared."

Then she laughed. "I've got to get along. I'll be seeing you, Johnny. Tomorrow maybe? You'll give me a call? I'll be at my place."

"Sure, we'll get together," I told her. "I'll call in the morning. Only — I always forget the number."

"Silly!" She hesitated, took the lipstick out of her purse, scrawled it on the mirror: AG 2-9357. "There — now you won't forget."

She put her arms around me, pressed her lips against mine. As she pulled away she laughed again. "I've got you all smeared."

She stood at the door, an uncertain smile on her lips. "Johnny — you don't hate me, do you? I told you about it. I tried to warn you."

"I don't hate you," I said. "Maybe I should. Whatever happens —"

She shook her head. "You're the hardest guy to understand. Honest — sometimes —"

She drew the coat tightly about her. She was too thin and the hips too prominent. But she had a flashy appeal and you figured she didn't have too much trouble getting by.

You couldn't help feeling somehow sorry for her. Maybe it was the put-on air of bravado. The uncertain smile stayed on her lips. I tried to smile back. She turned quickly and went out. I heard the high heels clattering down the stairs.

I was alone in the room. It was a curious sensation. This was my room — yet I was a stranger in it. I felt I should apologize to Johnny Wilson for butting into his life.

The girl was hard to figure. From what she said, she worked in a night club — probably a singer or dancer. She had the air of being born for trouble — you felt pity for her, without knowing why, but you couldn't trust her. Something in the way she looked and spoke gave you the tipoff.

She was mixed up in this business I was in — whatever and whoever was behind it. It wasn't my safety she bothered about — it was herself. She was scared — scared for her own precious skin. That was why she wanted out. That was why she kept talking about us clearing before it was too late.

I looked around the room. It was shabbily furnished. The cot in the corner was covered with a green spread. There were a couple of straight-backed chairs and the faded gray armchair near the window. Behind the armchair was a bridge lamp with a

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battered yellow shade.

None of the things in this room were familiar to me — except for the watch, nothing seemed to be my own. In the old-fashioned bureau dresser were a couple of shirts, several pairs of shorts and some socks. When I'd left the hospital all I'd had was a barracks bag full of Army clothes and a few souvenirs I was bringing back for my folks. The barracks bag wasn't around — neither were any of the articles I'd had with me. The single small closet I examined held nothing except a few wire coat hangers and a little pile of soiled laundry on the floor.

But there was a second table in the room which caught my interest. It was a small table set against the wall, with a chair before it. Apparently it served as a writing desk. On top was a reading lamp and a clutter of papers, envelopes, letters and bills. Those letters sat before me like treasure I wouldn't have traded for all the cash in the mint.

It was Johnny Wilson's desk. These were Johnny Wilson's letters. Out of them I could reconstruct some of what had been happening — I could begin to come to grips with these people who wanted Johnny Wilson dead.

I pulled out the chair and sat down.

I studied those papers for hours. Some I read a dozen times, trying to squeeze out the last drop of meaning.

Most of them weren't particularly personal or helpful. There was a theater program for a musical at the Morosco. There were two ticket stubs for prize fights at St. Nicholas Arena. An advertisement from a liquor store featured a new shipment of blended whiskey. There was a half-used package of matches from the Plaza Hotel.

One crumpled piece of paper particularly puzzled me. The writing was my own. But the words were senseless. They sounded almost as if I'd been drugged:

"This isn't — sure it is, yes, it is. I'll be Queen of the May — or June, July, August — anyway Evie knows but she's afraid. . . . Evie has to hurry she always has to sing, has to be the show . . . poor little Evie running out into the night singing but nobody listens Evie says they get drunk."

I studied the thing, tried to figure its meaning. I must have been drunk myself when I wrote it. Drunk and trying to set down my ideas and impressions. It was the only explanation I could figure. Evie — she was of course the blonde. That singing business probably was about her going to the night club. And there was one line that stood out: "Evie knows but she's afraid. . . ."

The blonde had talked that way — as if there were something I knew, something I'd been trying to find out — she'd warned me about butting into "other people's business."

There was another letter there I couldn't understand. It was written on blue folded stationery with a white monogram "C" on the first page. The writing was feminine. It was very neat and even. It read:

"Johnny: I suppose you'd call this the sign off because I'm writing to tell you it is completely finished and it just seems silly not to face it right away because there isn't any point in trying to keep a bad bargain.

"It's really ended, Johnny. Of course you knew it too. When I saw you — I knew it in that instant — everything caved in like — toy blocks. And you

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trying to lie, trying to take it all as such a great big joke.

"I don't mean to sound like a love-sick child. Really, I'm over that part of it. I can look back on what happened completely unaffected. It was all a whirlwind, sweet words and laughing and I thought nothing could ever be so wonderful but that isn't what you have to have to build your life on — it isn't really what people mean by romance. I thought it was but I was wrong. A woman hates to admit being such a fool about things like that but, you see, it's what I'm doing now.

"I don't particularly blame you, Johnny. Maybe you tried to mean some of the things you said and all our fine plans and the rest of it. But now I'm on solid ground, I've gotten out of the chariot and come down from the stars. Whatever that crazy magic was — it's all vanished.

"I seem to remember you don't like women who cry and besides I'm not writing to weep. I only wanted to be sure you knew how things stood. It's finished. I don't know about details, Johnny. Daddy says he'll take over the business of straightening it out. The hardest thing is to have to admit that he and the others were right about it all along. I guess I was what Daddy said — a foolish girl in a runaway dream.

"But still they say there's good in everything. Maybe I'll learn from this. Maybe I'll learn to do what you said people have to do all the time — be on guard. I'll try to remember that."

It was signed "Carol." On the back of the blue envelope that went with it was the full name: "Carol Eaton — 77 Central Park West — New York City."

The letter was a shock. I read it through a number of times. This had been an affair — apparently one of those blitzkrieg romances.

I'd never wanted to get mixed up in anything like that. In the Army it was easy. You picked up some girl the fellows called "brig bait" along Market Street in Frisco. But she's cute and you have fun. Maybe in Manila you went with one of those Spanish type ladies of pleasure. Maybe you even saw them two or three times. It never was anything that mattered.

This was different. She didn't sound like anybody's pickup. She didn't belong with the others. I knew from the way the letter was written, from the whole tone of it. She didn't sound in the same world with that blonde, with threats of shooting and death.

Underneath her letter I discovered a soiled, much-folded piece of rice paper — with two Chinese characters written on it in red ink. It was like meeting an old friend. I'd carried that slip of paper with me for months. It was a souvenir I'd gotten from one of the flyers who'd made his way out of China by the guerrilla escape route.

The characters read *hsia yü* — Chinese for "heavy rains." It had been a code phrase — a recognition signal used by men from OSS and by guerrillas in contacting American prisoners of war in Japanese-held territory.

There was one other letter that was important, probably most important of all. I'd seen it before too. It wasn't addressed to John Wilson, but to Roy Marshall — Sergeant Roy Marshall at Halloran Hospital.

I remembered that letter. It had arrived the morning I left the hospital.

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It was a typewritten note from Captain Everett Curtis, United States Navy. A brief, business-like request for me to stop in at his hotel as soon as was convenient following my hospital release, which he understood was to be within a few days. The date of the letter was September fourth. It was on stationery of the Park Towers Hotel.

That was the first real break I'd had. I remembered I had been planning to go to see Captain Curtis before I got my reservation for Ohio. I remembered I'd been wondering why Curtis wanted to see me.

I'd never met him. But I'd known who he was, of course. In the East his name was like a legend. For years before the war he'd been head of Intelligence for our Far Eastern Fleet. During the years he was out there — serving as a central point for information going back to Washington — Curtis came to know much more about what was going on in the East than any other man in our government. After war broke out, they shifted him to Pearl Harbor and then back to Washington to help correlate intelligence information from that point.

When I got that letter, I figured maybe he had a list of all of us who'd gone in there and wanted a personal picture. Maybe he wanted to hear what I could tell him about the man, Downes. He must have known about Downes, or even had contact with him back in the old days.

I couldn't remember whether I'd been to see him or not. But there was the letter before me. This was one man I knew I could go to. One man who would understand the whole story.

It was after midnight. I decided I'd stay in the room that night. I'd get over to the Park Towers first thing in the morning.

I took the spread off the cot. There was a single checkered blanket underneath. The sheets didn't look fresh. But my legs ached and I knew I needed sleep. Rest, the doctor had said. I wondered if the doctor had completed his report. I wondered if police were hunting me. It didn't seem to matter. I grabbed a pair of pajamas out of the bureau.

As I lay there in the dark, one thing came to me I hadn't realized before. That letter had been on the desk here in the room. The letter addressed to Roy Marshall.

So the blonde must have known. Even if she hadn't known before — she wasn't the kind who would sit alone in my room and not read letters open on a desk. So she knew. She knew my name wasn't really John Wilson. She knew that I was Sergeant Roy Marshall.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE Park Towers was just off Central Park South. It was an old-fashioned, lush sort of place, with heavy carpets on the floor in the lobby and an expensive, hushed atmosphere. You almost felt you should be talking in whispers.

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I went up to the desk. There was a ung man behind it. He had a pimply ce and wore glasses. "Yes, sir?" he id. "What can we do for you?"

His tone said he was sure there was tle he could do for me. I said, "I'd ke to see Captain Everett Curtis. ould you tell him it's Sergeant Roy arshall calling."

For half a minute he looked at me ithout answering, his face without exression. At last he said, "I'm afraid at's impossible, sir."

"How do you mean?"

"Wait a moment, please." He turned uickly, hurried into an inner office and losed the door. After a moment, he ame out. This time there was with him n older, silver-haired, florid man who ooked as if he might have been the nanager.

"Yes, sir?" the older man asked, with a professional hotel smile. "Whom did you wish to see?"

I told him I wanted to see Captain Curtis. It was a matter of business and urgent.

"I am very sorry to have to inform you," he said, "Captain Curtis is dead."

The words had a numbing sound. *Captain Curtis is dead. I am very sorry to have to inform you, Sir —*

"When did he die?" I heard myself asking. "When was it — he — how?"

The silver-haired man would have been the perfect host for conventions. "You must have read about it in the papers," he said softly. "Captain Curtis was killed — slain in his room. It was an unfortunate occurrence for our hotel."

"Yes, it must have been — unfortunate for the hotel." I'd never met the Captain but I wondered how much time this florid gentleman had given in service to his country. "He was murdered? Shot to death?"

"How did you know he was shot," he asked, "if you didn't know he was dead?" He hesitated. "But — if you want details — you can obtain them out of back newspapers, I'm sure."

There was nervousness, a jerkiness in words that should have flowed even.

"Of course. I'll get the story out of the papers."

I stood there an instant. The man said, "If there is anything else —"

Something was going on in this place. I caught the jittery atmosphere. "Nothing more. There's — nothing. Thank you for your information."

I turned and started out. I saw a signal pass from one of the men behind the desk to two men standing in a corner of the lobby.

The two men caught up with me as I reached the sidewalk. They were rugged looking. Police badges flashed in their hands.

"Homicide Squad — Headquarters," the heavier one said. "Like to have a little talk if you don't mind. People downtown —"

"They got a few questions maybe you'd like to answer," the other finished.

I couldn't make a fight. They were on either side of me, the pressure of their hands at my elbows. If I tried to break and run I knew their bullets would be in my back. They were too calm, too damned certain. They shoved me forward into the waiting car.

They took my fingerprints at Headquarters. Several times on the way downtown, I tried to ask questions,

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tried to find out what the deal was. They told me to keep my shirt on and I'd get answers later. I tried again now, waiting in the fingerprint bureau. I looked around at the officers. I said I had a right to know what it was all about.

"I've been hurt," I told them. "I've been in a hospital because I was hurt. I was overseas in China and I got hit. I've got a right to know—"

When I said that, some of them started to laugh.

I tried to hold my temper. Finally one said, "Why don't you talk, you stupid jerk?"

The man was beefy faced. I wanted to hit him. I wanted to send my fist smashing into his rotten face. I felt my fingers digging into my palms.

Another detective broke into the talk. "Lay off," he told them. "McCormick's waiting upstairs. We better take the guy up."

McCormick was Lieutenant Barry McCormick of Homicide. He was behind his desk when we came in. Broad shoulders and a round face with prominent features. His head was bald and shiny and the strands along the sides were reddish, streaked with gray.

His whole manner was uninterested. He leaned forward a little when we came in, hands together on the glass-topped desk. He had a slight, impersonal smile. I could have been someone dropping in to ask about a job.

One of the detectives said, "This is the fellow we picked up, Lieutenant. Gives his name as Roy Marshall."

For an instant the little smile went away as McCormick surveyed me with a quick look. I felt he had me under a microscope. But it lasted only a few seconds. The smile came back as if somebody had pressed a button.

"Mr. Marshall?" he said politely. "Sit down, please."

Two policemen stayed at the end of the room near the door. I sat in the chair in front of the desk. McCormick leaned back in his own chair.

For several minutes he didn't say a word. His blue eyes gazed at the wall. He didn't appear to remember I was there.

Then, without preamble, he said, "You're in a spot, Marshall. What do you say about it?"

It was neat. It caught me off balance. "You mean — about the murder?"

The eyes focussed on me. "Yes — about the murder. Of course, about the murder. Why else would we have you here now?"

"I don't know," I told him quickly. "I — I wasn't sure that was why I was here. Nobody bothered to answer any of my questions. I didn't know about — Captain Curtis. I didn't know he was dead until I went there this morning."

"Didn't know he was dead?" His heavy eyebrows lifted like question marks. "Didn't know it at all? Why were you going to see him?"

"I had a letter from him. Some time ago, in Halloran Hospital. Before they let me out. You see—"

Somehow I had to tell him this story. Somehow I had to get over to him that those weeks in between were blank cards. I didn't — couldn't — remember. But when I tried to explain, the words stuck in my throat.

"It may sound crazy," I said, "I can't help it. This is the truth. It's God's truth. I was wounded in the head. Something happened to me when I got

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out. My mind must have snapped. I don't remember what happened. I don't remember anything —"

I managed to get some of it out. I told him about coming to on the subway — realizing who I was. He listened with an air of amusement. My words were getting excited, spilling over each other and I tried to check myself.

I said, "I'm sorry. I know it must seem crazy — me going in there and asking for Captain Curtis — when he's dead. But — I didn't know —"

"Not only crazy," he said. "It may also be clever. Particularly if you've been afraid we were getting close. You go to the one place where you're sure to be identified — you wouldn't do that if you were guilty. Or that's how you figure we'll figure."

The one place where you're sure to be identified. The one place you wouldn't go if you were guilty. McCormick broke into a short laugh. "But you don't remember, do you? You can't recall having been there before."

"Before?"

"On the day Captain Curtis was killed." The tone was matter-of-fact.

I stood up. The thing was coming clearer. I'd gone to the hotel as I'd planned to do. It must have been while I was there — or just afterwards — that my mind snapped. That must have been it. His death — and what happened to me — were tied in together.

McCormick still had the impersonal expression. I glared at him. "You've got to tell me," I said. "You've got to tell me what happened."

The two policemen moved forward. McCormick waved them off.

"Take it easy," he told me. "We're not holding back. You see, we've had men up at that hotel ever since the murder. Not knowing who might show up. Of course the clerks spotted you this morning. While you were talking to them — they got the word to us."

"How do you mean — spotted me?"

"Let's not kid. You were in there the day Curtis died. You asked to see the Captain. You went upstairs. No one saw you come down. Sometime after you went up a shot was heard. A little later they found Curtis dead."

He pitched the words at me like darts. These were facts he recited — simple and inescapable.

"I told you," I said. "I don't remember anything about that day."

"I didn't say we don't believe you."

There was a pause. I asked, "Where — where was Captain Curtis hit?"

"Now that's a good question." He frowned. "It was a single bullet in the heart. He died instantly."

Single bullet in the heart. Words came back to me. Words they had drilled into my mind. *Aim for the vital regions. The heart is the bullseye.* Day after day on the target range. *Never forget that one good shot is worth twenty that miss.*

Sergeant Roy Marshall, expert marksman. . . .

It wasn't so, of course. It couldn't be so. I'd read that book in the hospital. You couldn't make people do things.

"I didn't have any reason to kill him," I said. "They — the police — assumed it was I because —"

McCormick shrugged. "They didn't assume anything. There was a fire escape door on that floor. It was kept closed on account of cold weather. It was found open that day."

"Where did the door lead?"

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"Down to an alley. The alley leads out into the street. Rather handy exit."

I closed my eyes. This man thought I was guilty of murder. He was sure of it. He'd held the trial in his mind and brought in the verdict.

"I didn't kill Captain Curtis," I said. "I didn't know him. I didn't have any reason. I just didn't have any reason to do it."

"Perfectly possible," he said. "The fact is — no one here has accused you of anything — except yourself. Don't you think that's interesting?"

"Why don't you check with the Army?" I demanded. "My record's clear. Everthing I've told you is true. I'm Roy Marshall. I was a Sergeant. I was wounded in the head. I've been in the hospital. And —"

"And you've been out a couple of months and nobody's been able to find you."

It was a dead center hit. They'd been looking for me. Looking for me ever since I got out. Ever since they found Captain Curtis murdered in his room.

"You knew who I was?" I asked. "You were searching —"

"Sure. Sent out wanted circulars, all over the country. Confidential, of course. We didn't want to tip you off we were looking for you. There wasn't any publicity in the papers."

He stood up, hands in his pockets. He looked out of the window. "Your parents were notified. The FBI even had a couple of men stationed at your house, waiting for you to show up." He paused. "Too bad — ruining your life. And their lives too."

He turned, watching my reaction. "It's a pretty terrible shock for them. They knew you were getting out, coming home. They were excited about it. Then — you didn't show. The next thing — you're a fugitive, wanted in a murder case."

I didn't say anything. I was trying to let his words sink in, trying to picture what the thing must mean to them.

"Let's go back a bit, Marshall," he said, almost genially. "Let's look it over. When you left Halloran — what were your plans?"

"Plans? I wanted to get home. I've been wanting to go home a long time."

"But you had that note from Curtis — didn't you say — before you left the hospital?"

"Oh yes. I — I intended to stop in there first. I didn't know what he wanted."

"Did you — see him?"

"I —"

He knew I'd seen Curtis. That was why I was here now. Because I'd been identified by the clerk at the hotel. Because I'd gone upstairs to see Curtis the day he was killed.

You could hate a man like McCormick. No hurry. No fuss. The whole story will come out in due course. But you know he's playing a game. He's got you pinned down. There isn't any way out.

"I've told you before — I don't remember what happened on that day."

"Not until you came to yesterday on the subway —".

The sympathy in his voice rang false. He was putting on an act. The paternal note. Trust in me — I'm on your side. Stop trying to lie your way out.

He tried a sudden shift. "Before you went into the Army, Marshall — did you have any special ambitions?"

Before I went into the Army. Back

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a couple of eternities ago. Something I lived through on some other planet.

"I wanted to be the best agriculturalist in Ohio. I was going to school — agricultural school —"

"Your parents operate a farm, don't they?"

"Yes. I — I figured someday they'd — well, retire, you might call it. And I'd take over running the farm and —"

"You're the only son?"

"I've got an older brother. He left home early, went off to school. He's a lawyer in Dayton. Married, with a couple of kids. Anyway —"

"Anyway — you figured someday the farm would be yours. You would take over, as you put it."

He gave the words a twist. I said, "Not the way you make it sound."

"Have any idea about getting married?"

"No. Knew a lot of girls back home. Maybe someday —"

"But you haven't any special girl?"

"In the Army I played around with lots of women. Never thought about them seriously."

He laughed. "Not bragging, are you?"

"Not bragging," I said. "I'm like other guys. You think about meeting somebody — the ideal, I guess you'd call it —"

There was a knock at the door. One of the policemen opened it, let in three more men. McCormick greeted them expansively, told them to draw up chairs. It was obvious he'd called them to take part in the interrogation.

Two were young — dressed in plainclothes. The third was a middle-aged Lieutenant Commander. McCormick informed me the plainclothes men were from the Federal Bureau of Investigation. The Commander was Navy Intelligence.

McCormick enjoyed playing the host. He had them draw up the chairs in a semi-circle. He pulled out a box of Primadoras and passed them around. When I shook my head, he seemed surprised.

"You'd prefer a cigarette?"

I said I would. I hadn't realized how much I'd wanted a smoke until I took the first drag on the cigarette he gave me. It was sudden release. It made me realize how tense I'd been.

I knew it was part of the treatment. Part of McCormick's special technique. He faced me like a trainer putting a pet seal through his paces.

"We want the whole thing, Marshall. Start in at the beginning — when you left the hospital. Right up to now."

Some of it I'd already told him. I started in again. I told them as much as I recalled about leaving Halloran. Then — coming to on the subway. About the barroom — and finding out I'd been shot. About Dr. Gertz and going to my room and finding the girl. I explained how it happened I'd used that name "Johnny Wilson."

All the time I talked, they kept glancing at each other. I sweated it out, trying to find words, trying to make them see it was the truth. I didn't have to be told what they were thinking. They didn't believe me. I'd dreamed it up.

One part interested them — the bullet wound. The thing had given me only a couple of twinges since morning and I'd practically forgotten about it. I hadn't mentioned it before to McCormick — never got that far in the story.

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"It isn't serious," I told them. "Only I don't know how it happened. I haven't any idea who did it — or why."

They weren't impressed. Part of the act. Part of the alibi I'd been trying to build up. They made me stand up and take off my coat and shirt so they could examine the wound.

The bandage was still in place. McCormick said, "Light flesh wound. Not much more than a scratch. We'll have one of the docs look at it later."

"The damn thing doesn't fit the picture," the smaller FBI agent declared. "A fellow smart enough to build that yarn — ought to be too smart to pull a stunt like shooting himself."

"None of the alibi makes sense," his partner put in. "That gag about the girl. We can check on her — if she exists. But nobody's been able to find the murder gun — and this man gets shot and hasn't the vaguest notion why or where. It looks easy on the surface — until you start digging."

"The man's built the story rather cleverly," the Commander said. "If he sticks to it — it may be more difficult to break than we expect. He did just get out of Halloran —"

"I doubt if that cuts any ice," McCormick said, leaning back in the chair. "There's been a rash of servicemen coming back and pulling crimes. When they get caught — they always try to blame it on war psychosis. Juries are getting tired of that gag."

The Commander turned to me. "We don't believe your account, Marshall," he said slowly. "You're lying. Best thing for you would be to forget all that rigmarole. Who was in this thing with you? What was behind it?"

I didn't answer. I could see what was behind his arrogant air. Captain Curtis wasn't an ordinary figure. Too much information for our government — especially from the Orient — had funneled through his hands. Too many people might have had reason to want him dead.

They had to have the motives — the whole story. This time the motive might be more important than the murder itself.

"We've got to make this man realize," the Commander insisted, "that the truth now is his only hope."

"Maybe he will — later." It was the taller FBI man. "My idea is to start checking —"

"I can't see any cause for alarm," McCormick told them. "We've got him. We can keep hammering away from now to eternity. He'll crack sooner or later. Meanwhile — we start fitting the pieces together."

The door opened. It was Lieutenant West, the one who'd taken my fingerprints. He was grinning. "We got the report," he told McCormick. "Thought you'd like to know — the prints in the Curtis room — and Marshall's print — are the same."

There was a stir among the others. McCormick said, "Well — that's it."

I stood up. "What difference do the prints make?" I demanded. "I never denied going there — I don't remember it but I guess I must have. The fingerprints are just —"

"The proof we need," McCormick said quietly. "You wouldn't make a good cop, Marshall. You see, a suspect can take back a confession. Witnesses die — disappear — change their stories. But a fingerprint —"

He turned away, called the two po-

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licemen at the door. "Take this man out. We're holding him temporarily on suspicion of murder. Nothing's to go to the press."

The policemen started to escort me out. As we reached the door, McCormick halted them. "You might like to know, Marshall. We found those prints on his wallet. It was lying on the floor. You made a mistake — not taking it with you."

They took me out.

CHAPTER FIVE

THEY shoved me into a narrow "temporary detention" room. *You're being held on suspicion of murder,* my mind was repeating. You're not a human being any more, not anybody with rights. You're caged in.

They kept on with the questions. They'd leave me alone for an hour, then bring me back upstairs for more. Sometimes it was just McCormick, playing on all the strings, making me go over and over that same story, trying to force me into a slip.

I couldn't make a slip. I wasn't trying to duck. I was telling what I remembered.

Twice during the afternoon they took me to a conference room on the second floor. A half dozen detectives and FBI men started throwing questions at me there. They asked about robberies and holdups that had happened in the past month — things I never heard of. I told them I didn't know about those crimes. Then they'd start again asking about the murder. It'll go a lot easier if you give it to us straight. What made you do this thing? Didn't you plan the whole thing after you got his letter? You didn't want his money, did you? Had you known Captain Curtis before? Ever heard of him? Where had you heard about him? Let's go back to the beginning. . . .

McCormick said my mother was sick. He said it was because of this trouble. It would be better for everybody if I started telling the truth. He said he'd let them know I'd been found. But there wouldn't be any word about where I was picked up — or being held. Anyway not for a few days. Not until he was ready to take his case into court.

About five-thirty they brought me upstairs again, this time for a lineup. There were five other men in the lineup with me. Pickpockets and holdup men and car thieves. They were young — in their twenties — but dirty and unshaven. One had a cut over his eye and dried blood still on his face.

A police sergeant made us line up on a stage with a battery of lights blinding our eyes. Outside, in front of the lights, were detectives and witnesses. There was talk going on out there. One of the detectives told them to be quiet.

The special feature, this game of putting the finger on the guilty, was about to begin.

Two witnesses picked me out. I could see figures moving toward the

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platform and I saw one of them point. "That's him. That's Marshall. Couldn't mistake him."

I knew the voice. It was the older of the two clerks in the hotel. The other witness who picked me out was the weak-faced clerk I'd spoken to first.

When I saw who they were I figured it was just a formality. The police were just going through the ritual of having the hotel men identify me in the lineup. It wasn't anything new, anything I hadn't known about.

Then I heard the girl. I couldn't see her. She was brought in at the back of the room and they didn't bring her close to the platform.

"Miss Eaton," — that was the smooth voice of McCormick — "do you see anyone there you recognize?"

Miss Eaton. Carol Eaton, the girl whose letter I'd discovered in my room. They must have spent the afternoon searching the room. They found the letter, got hold of this girl.

"Yes," she said. "That's the one. The third from the left. That's — Johnny."

There was a hush in the room as she spoke. Her words came clearly — vibrating. But I knew she was frightened — trying to choke off her emotions. She sounded like an actress on the stage.

"You're entirely sure?" It was McCormick again. "There's no possibility of mistake?"

"No." It was almost a whisper. "That's the man who said he was Johnny Wilson. The man I married — under that name."

I was back alone, in the cell. The words echoed in my thoughts: *This is the man who said he was Johnny Wilson. The man I married under that name.*

I almost felt like laughing. Congratulations, Sergeant. Your bride just picked you out of the lineup. Your bride. The girl you married. Only you don't remember anything about it.

It wasn't any real marriage, of course. Not when you used a false name. It wouldn't count. Only — maybe the law said it did count. Maybe the law said it was valid, even with a wrong name.

I knew how McCormick would see it. You not only committed murder. You betrayed an innocent girl, tried to drag her into your rotten deals. One more item for the files.

They left me in the cell for about three hours after the lineup. It got to be night. The gray light stopped seeping in through the window. About eight or eight-thirty, two detectives marched in with a tray of food.

It smelled good. Thin soup and a platter of corned beef and potatoes and a cup of coffee. It looked like a banquet. The detectives leaned against the wall and watched me eat. They tried poking a few questions at me but I didn't hear them.

When I was finished one of them said, "Got a man wants to talk to you, Marshall."

"Somebody I know?"

The detective shrugged. "Ever hear of a fellow named Farr? Richard Farr?"

It sounded familiar. I tried to think where I'd heard it but I couldn't. I told them I might have heard about him somewhere but I wasn't sure.

"He's working with Navy Intelligence people right now," the detective said. "He's heard about you. Let's get going."

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I talked with Richard Farr in McCormick's office. McCormick wasn't there. It was Farr, the two detectives and myself.

He stood behind the desk, glaring down at me. He was a big man. His hair was white and he had small, darting blue eyes. He told me to sit down in the chair by the desk.

The detectives had told me about him. He'd worked for Curtis — unofficially — as an undercover operative in China. The Japs had captured him at the start of the war. Most of the time he'd been in solitary confinement.

There was anger in the pencil line lips. It ran under the surface — wordless anger you see sometimes on men in combat when a pal gets killed.

"I was his friend." There was a trace of British accent in his voice. "Captain Curtis was my friend. I want you to understand that."

"I'm sorry. I wish — I would like —"

He gave no hint that he even heard me. "Lieutenant McCormick has informed me of your rather incredible alibi. You have quite an inventive mind."

"I didn't know Captain Curtis." I'd told them that so many times. It was playing a record over and over. "I went to see him on that day. They say that's what I did —"

"I know — I've heard it all. You insist you lost your memory. Weren't in your right mind. But it isn't important. Let's get on. You were in the East during the war, I'm told."

"I was stationed in the Philippines for a time. Went into China on one show. Wasn't there long enough to — get acquainted, you might say."

His eyes narrowed. "You went into the China Coast. There was some story —"

"You've — you've been there?"

"I've been there." His words had a mocking sound. "I was born there, lived there all my life. My parents were missionaries. It was in South China I knew Captain Curtis. That was before the war. Before they threw me into a Jap prison. It was only after war ended I got out and Captain Curtis sent for me —"

He paused, "But I didn't get here in time. I didn't get to see him. The plane got as far as Chicago and I was waiting there and —"

Abruptly he stopped. "I want to hear about that China show — as you say."

There was no reason to hold back. Secrecy was done with, now war was over. And Farr was working with Navy Intelligence. He had access to classified information. I could spill the story out.

He didn't interrupt. He stood there behind the desk — towering, stone-faced, motionless — listening. Even when I finished he stayed silent. After a long wait he said, "I heard about her. I heard how she died — how Sam Downes got away. I hadn't realized — you were the American involved."

His hands were in the coat pocket of the rumpled gray suit. I noticed the face was tinged with a sallow tan.

"I once saw Downes." He was talking more to himself than to me. "Shanghai — in thirty-four. You didn't see him often. Few people ever saw him."

"You talk like he's dead."

"He should be dead. He would be dead — dead today — if —"

He halted. The eyes were probing into mine. There was a new tenseness

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in his manner. "It was your mission. You missed. You killed the Chinese —"

"That was accidental. Something nobody could help."

"You say it was an accident. You say he pulled her in front of him. But — it might just as well have been some deal."

Sudden, uncontrollable anger surged inside me. I didn't think he believed what he was saying. He was twisting the knife. He wanted to see me hurt. It was a kind of pinprick torture.

"Downes tried to kill me." I was almost shouting. "He put a bullet in my head. You couldn't believe — you couldn't imagine I had any contact with him —"

"I don't believe or imagine anything. I want truth."

"You won't get it from him, Mr. Farr," one of the detectives interrupted, with a short laugh. "Not with the lies he's been trying to feed us."

Farr shot him a quick glance. "I'll do it my way, if you don't mind." Then, turning back to me, "I'm not making accusations. But I know Downes would doublecross his own soul for the right price. You may have learned that — the hard way."

He drew a pipe from his pocket, nervously turning it in his hands. "They asked me to talk with you. To dig down and find the reasons. They think it must have been something that happened out there. They may be right. I'm not sure."

He shuffled from behind the desk, walked toward me, stood over the chair. The face was aging — tired. The lines were deep and drawn tight.

"Nobody believes your story. Nobody's going to believe it. Don't you realize that, you blundering idiot?"

He stopped suddenly. I said, "I've told you the facts. I can't help what you or anybody else believes. I can't tell you any more than I've already done. Can't you understand that?"

"I understand. Every bit of evidence points to your guilt. They know you're in it, Marshall. Only they don't know why. They don't know who was in it with you."

"You think it was Downes," I said. "You think I was mixed up in some fantastic fairy tale in China. Some plot I hatched with him to get rid of Curtis. That makes a lot of sense, doesn't it? That's real smart."

Almost spitting out the words, Farr said, "There was a reason you did it. There had to be a reason. You wouldn't be the first American Downes managed to buy out."

"Sure. We got together when my outfit was in Luzon. Completed arrangements in MacArthur's office at Manila City Hall —"

"Shut up!" he shouted. "Shut up, you dirty-mouthed little —"

I killed his friend. That's what he thought. That was what the evidence said. I killed his friend. They had all they needed for proof. I didn't have to be a lawyer to know that much.

Suppose he was right. Suppose all of them were right. Suppose I had killed him. Even so — *I hadn't done it.* Not Roy Marshall. It wasn't me. It was this other fellow. It was Johnny Wilson.

"You killed him," Farr was saying. "I don't know why you did. I don't know who was in it with you. We're going to find out. We'll get the truth. The whole damn crowd."

He swung away from me. "I don't

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want to talk with him any more. Not tonight."

The hulking, powerfully built man was actually trembling. The detectives stood up. "McCormick told us you were to question him as long as you liked. If you want us to bring him back later —"

"It won't help. I wanted to hear that story about China. We knew he'd gone in there on one of those missions. But we hadn't known —" He hesitated. "It's the one thing that might help, that may be a lead —"

He left it unfinished. I sat there, watching him. This man was part of the East. Part of that world of double-talk — trickery — violent emotions. I knew he despised me.

The detectives signaled to me to get moving.

It must have been nearly dawn. I'd been in a kind of half sleep on the bunk in the lockup.

Someone was banging on the door. It was a clanging, metallic sound. I opened my eyes, looking up into the half darkness of the cell. Trying to get my bearings, to remember where I was.

Then I realized. The guard had opened the barred door to let someone in. It was a man, small, slightly built. There was just enough light coming in from the passageway for me to see.

I looked up into his face. For one moment I wasn't sure if I were awake or still dreaming. It was a Japanese. . . .

The rush of terror was instinctive. I was back in the jungles. I was caught off guard. My hand groped for a weapon, any weapon.

It lasted only a second. Then I knew. This wasn't jungle. It was a cell at Police Headquarters. They were holding me for questioning. They wouldn't have any Japs in here. Nobody you had to kill. This wasn't somewhere out in the Pacific.

He was wearing a dark business suit. A gray felt hat was pushed back on his head.

"Morning, fellow," he said. "Sorry to bust you out of your sleep."

The New York accent was a shock. It didn't seem to fit. Nisei, he was. I'd seen them, worked with them, overseas. You often wondered about them, how they must have felt, helping to smash the place their families came from. Then — one of them would die, die fighting on our side, and that made it harder to understand.

I said, "What the hell do you want?"

"Come off of that," he shot back. "I got to ask you some questions."

I swung my legs around. I'd taken off my shoes and now I fumbled for them in the half light.

"What do they want now?"

"The name's Yamada." He smiled. "Lieutenant George Yamada. Otherwise called Spike. Work for Army G-2. They sent me over to try to get some straight dope."

He sat down on the other end of the bunk. I tried to rub sleep out of my eyes. I said, "Happy to have you drop in."

There was something inscrutable about his expression. I wondered if it were just in my mind. This fellow called himself Spike and talked with a Manhattan accent. But his eyes had the window shades drawn. You couldn't guess what was going on inside.

"Maybe I should have knocked before barging in," he said. "You looked

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like you were about to dive for my throat."

"Sorry. I didn't know what was happening. Thought I was waking up somewhere in the Pacific. Looked up — saw a face —"

"Don't start apologizing. I was out there too. We had G.I.'s guarding us day and night, so we wouldn't be shot up by our own men."

He was young, probably about the same age as me. He had the typical, nonchalent air of the New Yorker. It was a curious mixture.

I said, "They did have a lot of trigger-happy guys. Where were you?"

"All over. Stationed at Shafter for a while on Oahu. Then it was Guam and points west. Finally got up to Tokyo, working on war crime investigations."

He gave me a cigarette, lit it for me, then lit his own. "I got a look at your service record before I came over. You got around plenty."

"Saw all of it I wanted. They can have the whole damn ocean with the islands thrown in."

"How long'd you stay in Honolulu?"

"Couple of weeks is all. Just long enough to get used to the place and have pictures taken with some of those hula models up on Hotel Street."

"Those honky-tonk wahenies?" He snorted. "Biggest gyps west of Coney Island."

He was being clever. He was forcing me to tell about myself, whether I wanted to or not. But I didn't mind talking. He knew that world out there, the small town of the Pacific. He'd been a part of it.

Casually — easily — he got the conversation around to Subic Bay, across the island from Manila. Our outfit had camped just outside of Subic town. It was a lawless place, a tropical frontier town, full of dilapidated shanties called "night clubs" where you bought bad liquor and cheap girls.

Spike asked, "Ever hear of a gent by the name of Undo?"

It was a quick thrust. I knew he was watching my reactions. I'd heard of Undo. He was one of the Japs hiding back in the hills. They said he'd had a radio and kept in touch with Japan and parts of occupied China. Rumors were Undo peddled dope to natives — in exchange for information.

I realized then — this was Spike's special target. Sam Downes was mixed up in the dope angle. Downes collected the stuff and sold it to the Japs in Shanghai. They were supposed to be bringing it in secretly at night, dropping it somewhere along the Luzon coast.

That was it. That was why G-2 sent Spike over to ask me questions. Somebody had dreamed up the fantastic notion that I might have contacted Downes — through that stinking Jap in the hills.

"I heard of Undo," I told him. "Everybody heard of him in our outfit."

"Ever meet him?"

"Stop being a goddam fool. You know I didn't make any contact with Undo. If I'd seen him I'd have blown his brains out."

He didn't answer. I said, "That's what they sent you over here for, isn't it? To check up on a damn yarn like that."

"May seem nuts to you. But there's a guy dead. A guy who knew a hell of

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a lot about out there. They think you did it. They think you killed him. So they're trying to go back, to see where it began, what might be the causes. Doesn't that make sense?"

"It's just preposterous. The idea that I could be working with a Jap hiding in the bush. Go back and tell them I say it's balmy. You were out there — you ought to know. Can't you see it wouldn't be possible?"

"I was out there, sure. I know people back here don't understand what it was like. But they got a murder on their hands. They are trying to find motive. Any hell you went through — that's your business. Far as they're concerned — it might as well be a Broadway stickup."

He was silent, gazing at that tiled wall, a slight twist on his lips.

I said, "The idea is — make like the war never happened."

"Don't blow your top," he told me. "You can't expect them to understand. And you've got one thing in your favor — they won't move fast."

"How do you mean — won't move fast? Too vital. Curtis was too important. They've got to be sure they're right. They have to know all the angles."

"That means — I'll be stuck in some cell until they're ready?"

"Maybe — maybe not."

He leaned back against the wall. The light struck the high cheekbones. He had that masklike expression again. I couldn't guess what he was thinking.

He kept on asking questions. I gave him the details of the jaunt into China. Once or twice he threw in a question about Subic Bay and people I'd known in the town. I knew there were Filipinos in Subic working for us with one hand, and with the other helping Undo and the Japs back in the hills. Spike was watching me, trying to see if there were any way to tie me to them.

He stood up finally. We'd been talking more than an hour. Daylight was creeping back in through the window.

"You see, Roy," he said, "Curtis knew all about Downes. Knew him and loathed him. Back before the war Downes was a big shot in the dope trade. Curtis and Farr were out there — working together. Trying to break him —"

He paused. "It just seems like a hell of a strange coincidence — you being mixed up with the death of one — and letting the other one get away."

He was at the door, signaling to the guard to let him out. I said, "You don't believe that. You don't really believe it."

He turned. "I don't know what the deal is. I just don't know. You may be telling the truth, as much as you know it."

It wasn't much to cheer about. But at last it gave me an even break. I said, "Thanks. Don't make the report too rough."

The guard was opening the door. Spike glanced back at me. I said, "Wait a minute. I've got one question. It's about that girl —"

"Carol Eaton? The one who picked you out of the lineup?"

I nodded. He said, "McCormick talked with her yesterday afternoon late. She's got a marriage certificate."

"But she must know. She must be in it. She must be able —"

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"McCormick's smart," Spike stated flatly. "His report says she's okay. Society girl or like that. On the flighty side. But never mixed up in any trouble."

"But how did I meet her? How do they know what she is or isn't mixed up in? How can they be sure?"

"Don't worry. If she is involved — they'll have her in it up to her permanent waves."

He was standing in the passageway. As a parting shot he called back, "Must be quite a crimp — finding yourself married to a dame you never even met."

McCormick was pacing in his office. His manner had changed from the day before. He wasn't so grim — so sure of himself.

"You're getting to be a first-class headache, Marshall," he told me.

"What am I supposed to say to that?"

He shrugged. "We've been checking up."

"I know. Yamada was over to see me early this morning. Lieutenant Yamada."

"Lieutenant Yamada?"

"That's what he said his name was, Army G-2."

He seemed puzzled. Finally he said, "Well, they've quite a few boys over there now. Young fellows, most of them. Still have a lot to learn."

I said, "You talked with that girl, Lieutenant. With Carol Eaton —"

"Well!" He whirled. "So you remember her?"

"No — I don't. That's just the point. I don't know her."

He relaxed a little and laughed. "I see. How did you happen to know her name?"

"I — I read it in that letter. The same letter you must have found in my room."

His expression was dubious. I said, "You talked with her. Do you think — do you suspect — she's involved?"

The eyes narrowed. "I think she's a romantic kid you took for a rotten ride."

"I — don't even know what she looks like."

He was still pacing, hands in his pockets. Then he stopped, swung around.

"Marshall," he said, "I got a surprise for you. A hell of a surprise. We're letting you go. We're letting you out."

He had that melodramatic air which told me he was back to acting. I stood there, watching, not speaking.

"Don't you understand?" he asked. "We're not going to press the charges."

"I don't understand. You said you had your evidence. You've got the fingerprints."

"It isn't enough. Mightn't stand up in court. Of course, we'll keep on investigating. I'll have to ask you not to leave the city."

It wasn't straight. They weren't letting me go set free. They could keep tabs on me, wherever I went, whoever I saw. There wouldn't be a moment I was free of them. That was it. Through me, McCormick figured to get the others, the ones I was supposed to be working with.

He stared out of the window. "I still think I'm right," he said. "The others say no."

I decided to play it his way. "Anybody can make an error, Lieutenant. You can't be right every time."

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I knew the egoist in him didn't like that. He said, "I'm cognizant of my own shortcomings. Your coat and hat are there on the chair. You're at liberty to leave when you please."

I picked up the hat and coat. "Next time," I said, "I hope we meet under more favorable circumstances."

"I trust so too," he said with a slight smile.

It was bitter cold in the street. The blast of air — of freedom — tasted sweet. I had only a few dollars in my pocket. I had no idea where I was heading. Most of all I wanted to get away from there — from Police Headquarters.

Then I glanced back. Even in that mob of people, I was certain I was being followed. McCormick would never have let me out of there without a couple of shadows in the offing. Fifty yards back, I noticed a man standing a bit nonchalantly in a doorway.

The light turned red and traffic on Broadway halted. I started across the street. Out of the corner of my eye I saw the man in the doorway move forward into the crowd behind me.

CHAPTER SIX

Thoughts kept crawling back as I walked. You've got to face it. You've got to get the answers. You're not free, not really. They're right behind you. They're letting you out for bait.

Look at it coldly — objectively — add up the facts. It wouldn't do any good to blame this other one, this subterranean half that called itself Johnny Wilson. The law only cares about who pulls the trigger.

I was beginning to hate my hands.

The trigger. The murder weapon. The weapon police were still hunting. That was the weak spot in the case, the hole McCormick had to fill. They didn't have the death gun. They didn't have a notion in hell where it was.

They said Curtis was killed with a forty-five automatic. I had a forty-five, sure. So did plenty of other men, roaming New York streets. It's a standard sidearm in the Army. I had mine packed in the barracks bag. I didn't have any idea where the bag was. But I knew for certain it wasn't up in that room. Neither was the automatic. I'd gone over every inch of the place myself.

They'd given the room a first class inspection. Ashtrays — magazines — everything on the center table — were gone. So were the letters and papers on top of the writing table.

The green spread and the bedclothes were piled in the middle of the floor and the mattress was pushed half off the cot. Even the few pieces of laundry in the closet were scattered on the floor, as if detectives had rummaged through them.

I'd seen all I needed. Enough to know they'd been there. Enough to know they'd gone over the place with their fingerprint powders and chemicals, all the scientific apparatus they

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tote around in the business of trapping human beings.

It looked like a thorough search, their hunt for clues, for proof. Yet one thing they'd forgotten. They hadn't bothered to rub off the lipstick telephone number the girl had scrawled on the mirror.

It stood before me like a gaudy reminder. The blonde. The one who really had the answers. She knew who had thrown a bullet at me. She could tell me about the others.

I wanted to talk with her again. I knew more now about what happened. I knew about the murder. I could make her spill the rest.

Just inside the vestibule, on the first floor, I'd seen a pay phone. I found a nickel in my pocket and hurried down the stairs.

I dialed the number and waited. After a short wait the nickel came back and I heard an operator's voice: "What number are you calling, please?"

I hadn't made any mistake about the number. I repeated it to the operator. In a second she was back. "I'm sorry, sir. There isn't any such number."

I hung up. The blonde had played it neat. She must have guessed what happened. She must have known — or suspected — from the way I acted, the things I said.

I went back in my mind to the moment I asked about the number. I remembered she hesitated an instant, looked surprised. Then she'd drawn out the lipstick and written the number down. But it wasn't real. It was something she made up, the first figures that came into her mind.

She said she was singing in some club. That could be true. But you'd have to tour every night spot in the city to find her. It was a job for the police. Maybe they were on it already, maybe they'd found her. But I couldn't go back and ask them to help. I had to talk with her myself — with nobody else around.

There was still Carol. Johnny Wilson's bride. The girl they said I married. They said she was in the clear. McCormick called her a romantic kid I took for a run around.

I had to see her. I didn't know how she fitted into the picture, what the real story was. But I knew the Central Park address was straight. That wasn't any fake. The police already had contacted her there.

She had to let me in. She had to talk with me. No matter what she thought — or what she was.

The gold-braided doorman said, "Good evening, Mr. Wilson. Nasty weather we've been having, sir."

It was one of those soaring modern apartment houses, almost like a hotel. The doorman smiled as he held open the door. I was known here. I was being welcomed back.

I stepped onto the elevator. The elevator man said, "Glad to see you, Mr. Wilson. Been on a business trip?"

I nodded. "You might call it that."

Almost like coming home. Coming home to a place you didn't know. Being greeted by people you'd never seen before.

He closed the elevator door and we started up. I wanted to ask on what floor the Eatons lived — what apartment. I checked myself in time. He stopped on the sixteenth floor. I walked out into the hallway.

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I heard the elevator door close behind me. For a moment I stood undecided. There were three doors opening to three different apartments.

I had a moment of panic. They didn't seem like doors. They were like guards standing there, challenging me.

The panic only lasted an instant. Each entrance had its neat little card above the bell. The apartment at the end of the hall had an engraved card with the name I hunted: "Frank Eaton."

I pressed the bell. It was one of those chime gadgets. The notes reverberated through the hall.

In a moment the door opened. A butler stood there, a short roly-poly man. He had a shocked expression — I might have been coming back from the dead.

"Mr. Wilson!" It was almost a whisper.

I looked beyond him into the apartment. It was done in lavish, modernistic style. Directly ahead in the foyer was a large circular mirror and a low, light burnished console table.

"I want to see my wife."

"Your wife, sir?" His manner was nervous. "I'm sorry. I'm afraid Miss Carol doesn't wish to —"

"I've got to see her."

"I don't like to say this, sir, but —"

I pushed past him into the apartment. I removed my coat and hat and handed them to him without speaking. He took them with a helpless acceptance.

He was frightened. He said, "Very well. If —"

"Where is she? Will you tell her —"

"They're — in the drawing room."

I didn't look at him. There were voices ahead. I walked toward them, a short distance up the hall.

It was a large room. The walls were done in modernistic beige paper. There were low-slung divans and over-stuffed chairs and a heavy wine-colored carpet on the floor.

On the divan near the door two middle-aged men smoked cigars. Across from them, curled up in an armchair, was a tallish woman with an elaborate hairdo. She wore an embroidered blue house-gown.

The girl was in the center of the room. She stood there alone, motionless. She had golden red hair and a young, oval-shaped face with large probing blue eyes. She was wearing a white dress. It seemed to fit her character.

This would be Carol. This would be the girl who had written that letter, with its mixture of youthfulness and maturity, of poetry and a hard-headed appreciation that you had to face facts even when you hate them.

I stopped in the doorway. There was no sound in the room. I knew they were all looking at me. I could feel their eyes — and their loathing — burning into me.

Only there was no loathing in her face. The red lips were parted in surprise. The eyes had a searching expression, as if she were trying to decide in her own mind why I was here.

It was an electric moment. The beauty of the girl was undeniable. It was a strong, young, vibrant kind of beauty. Intense, untouched loveliness that made you afraid.

The two men were standing now. So also was the lady of the Antoine hairdo. She was tall — there was a certain put-

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on queenliness in her manner. The blue gown was long and sweeping.

She raised her hand to her breast in a melodramatic gesture. "We'd hoped," she declared, "you would have the decency to stay away."

I glanced around at them, trying to take in this scene, trying to get some notion of who they were. I walked into the room slowly. Walked toward the girl.

As I came toward her, her eyes focused on mine. There was accusation in them — cold and direct and unwavering.

I came to within a few feet of her. I said, "You're Carol, aren't you? You're Carol Eaton."

She didn't answer. Her eyes never left mine. She was rereading the page, making new interpretations, trying to see if there really were new undertones she hadn't suspected were there.

"You are — Carol?" I repeated.

"It's no use, Johnny." The voice was liquid, trembling. "It's no use pretending."

The tall woman flounced over to her side, hovering there protectingly. "Of course it's Carol. Who did you think it was — Myrna Loy?"

The two men moved toward the center of the room too. "See here, Wilson," the white haired man said. "We've talked with the police. We have all the information. We wish nothing more —"

"You're Carol's father?"

He looked at me a second uncomprehendingly. He said, "The game isn't any good, Wilson. It's no use playing it out."

"No use whatsoever, young man," the tall woman declared. "Mr. Wilson — or Marshall — or whatever your name is."

"Marshall," I told her. "Roy Marshall. Formerly Sergeant Roy Marshall."

"Well — whatever it is — whoever you are — it doesn't matter to us. You haven't any more power to hurt us. You might as well know too that the police are fully aware you are here. Ever since you were released from the jail, they've been following you. There hasn't been an instant —"

She had her head tossed back in a kind of triumphant posture. The manner was false. It was put on, the way she put on an evening gown. It was a kind of cosmopolitan air she adopted, not meaning it, not really expecting anybody to believe in it.

"We have had the entire story," she went on. "And of course we realize the elopement didn't mean a thing. It wouldn't stand up in any court in the world. You and Carol simply aren't really married —"

Carol turned quickly toward her. "Aunt Edna, please. We can settle these things —"

"Yes," I said. "We can settle them. I want to settle them. But —"

I looked around at these people. The short stout man edged forward and studied me with angry eyes.

"You haven't any right to be here, Marshall. I'm Mr. Eaton's attorney. I've informed him this marriage was a fraud. We'll file an annulment petition at the earliest possible —"

"There wasn't anything fraudulent," I said. "I didn't intend to fool anybody. I —"

"We'll allow the courts to decide about that."

I could expect nothing from these

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people. No help — no grain of belief I might be telling the truth. They looked on me as filth. Filth that had no right to be there. Dirt that befouled their home.

I turned from them, back to Carol. "I — I came here to talk to you."

"You did? You really did?" There was amusement and mockery in her voice.

"It sounds stupid," I said. "I realize it does —"

There was something in their manner, something in the way they looked from me to her. They'd been waiting for this. The police had forewarned them. There would be a dictaphone set up. Or detectives behind one of the doors taking down stenographic notes.

"Johnny," she said, "there just — well, there isn't anything you and I have to talk about."

"There's plenty. Plenty I've got to talk about, anyway."

"You can say anything you want here —"

"I don't want other people. What I've got to say —"

"There isn't anything you could say that would matter at all. Just — isn't anything!"

"It isn't only what I have to say. There are things I — have to find out. Things I want to ask."

She shrugged her slim shoulders petulantly as if I were a servant bothering her with petty details.

"All right, Johnny. All right."

She seemed perfectly calm now. Her manner seemed to say she would be impervious to anything I might have to tell her, any special pleading for my cause.

But the fact that they let her do it was what made me certain about the police. I'd married her — eloped with her, evidently — under a false name. I'd been held and questioned on a charge of murder and the police were sure of my guilt.

They wouldn't have dared let her be alone with me, unless the police had talked with them, unless it had all been anticipated and arranged, in the belief I'd spill some of the information they wanted.

It was all too easy. Their arguments too weak. She'd surrendered too quickly. They were staging the performance. But McCormick hadn't been thorough enough in the coaching.

Carol said, "If you wish, we — we could go into the breakfast room, Johnny. Nobody — no one will bother us. We can sit and talk."

She started out of the room and I followed. There was that embarrassing hush. You could hear the scrape of our footsteps on the heavy nap of the carpet.

Aunt Edna was watching me with an intent expression. I glanced at her. Her eyes were filled with a curious kind of pity.

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CHAPTER SEVEN

SHE sat across from me in the breakfast room. Sunlight came in through the large windows and gleamed on her hair.

The white dress was pretty. There were little colored buttons on the shoulders and the neckline was cut at an off-angle. The sleeves were fussed up near the top, mutton-like. It was old-fashioned, done in modern style.

She pressed a buzzer and after a moment the stoutish butler came in. He seemed to have overcome his fright. "Farrell — could we have some hot coffee, please?" Carol asked. Then, looking at me, "You still do like coffee, don't you, Johnny?"

I told her yes. It was strange to realize she knew my tastes. I drank a lot of coffee, as many as ten or twelve cups a day. Evidently Johnny Wilson had been a coffee drinker too.

"I had no idea what happened," she said. "None at all. Not until Lieutenant McCormick called yesterday."

Her face was pale as she spoke. The lips drawn together, trying to hide her emotions. I knew what she had to be thinking. McCormick had told her. McCormick had probably given it to her undiluted. You're married to a killer. The man you thought you loved is a murderer. We're going to try to send him to the chair.

"Not until McCormick told you," I said. "That means — he didn't hold back any punches."

"They found my letter to you in your room. That's how they knew where to find me. Lieutenant McCormick said yesterday —"

"What did he tell you?" I asked her. "Did he give you any of my side of it?"

"He said you'd been arrested at the Park Towers. He said they'd been hunting for you. That you weren't Johnny Wilson but a Sergeant Rob Marshall and they'd been hunting for you because — because you were wanted for murder."

She could hardly say the last words. You could see her reaction, fear that swept through her. But she wasn't the sort who cried easily. The eyes were wide but there weren't any tears.

"Why did you have to lie, Johnny?" she demanded. "Why did you pretend you were somebody else. Somebody decent — somebody —"

"I didn't pretend. It was — it was my mind. My own memory. Didn't McCormick say anything about that? Didn't he at least tell you —"

She smiled. "He told me. He told me you'd invented some crazy story about not remembering anything about it, anything about what had happened to you. He said it was just an act. That they knew it wasn't so. Nobody believes it. It isn't any use, you see —"

"You think Johnny Wilson was just an alias?"

"What's the point of this?" she asked. "Whatever is going to happen to you, you've got to face it. They won't let you get away, Johnny. You might as well realize that."

It wasn't easy telling her the story. But I made her listen. I made her listen to every detail of what had hap-

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pened in the past three days, from the first moment on the subway when I suddenly recovered my own consciousness. I went over the whole thing, step by step.

If there were detectives making notes in the next room, they must have been annoyed at having to listen to that recitation. They'd heard it — made me tell it often enough, before, over and over.

Farrell came in with the coffee. Neither of us said anything as he put down the cups, the cream and sugar.

I could tell she didn't believe it. I could tell from the way she wouldn't look at me as she stirred the sugar in her cup. She didn't want to meet my eyes.

"It doesn't go," she said. "Don't you see it isn't going to work? It's only a futile attempt to explain everything away. I would have thought you were smarter."

"Carol," I said, "suppose it were true?"

"What?"

"Even though you don't believe any of it — just suppose I were telling it straight. How would you know the difference? How would you know which story was right — and which wasn't?"

She looked puzzled. She shook her head. "I don't know, Johnny. I don't know how it would be different. I don't know how you could tell."

I said, "Carol — I don't remember. I don't even remember when you and I met. They tell me we're married. They say you've got a wedding certificate —"

I stopped. I think the words were striking her like blows. She stood up suddenly, walked out of the room. A moment later she returned. "I kept the certificate carefully, Johnny," she told me. "Not that I much care now."

She tossed it down on the table. I picked it up. It was some town in Maryland. Justice of the Peace Lawrence Collins. United this day in Holy Wedlock Carol Eaton and John Wilson.

The signatures were underneath. I knew the "John Wilson" was my handwriting. But I had to be sure. I drew a pencil and a scrap of paper from my pocket and wrote the name down. I compared it with the name on the certificate. There couldn't be any doubt.

Carol stood watching me. "Aren't you carrying it a little far? We're only the two of us here. Not any gallery."

"I'm sorry. McCormick was right about one thing anyway. You got taken for a ride. A long and lousy ride at that."

"He told you that?"

"He said I'd taken you for a despicable ride and he was right. I did. But I didn't mean to. You don't believe me — but I don't remember."

She didn't answer. I thought I saw doubt in her face. As though she were at last asking herself if it could possibly be true, what I was telling her.

"Whether you think I'm lying or not," I said, "you've got to tell me some of the things that happened. You've got to tell me — how we met. Where —"

She walked to the window. The sunlight struck against her face.

"It was one night at a dance, Johnny. A USO dance, down at the Commodore. You were wearing a uniform. You really looked very handsome. I rather liked dancing with you. In fact

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we danced together most of that evening."

She turned and faced me. "There wasn't anything about that boy to make me think he wasn't straight. He was like a hundred others you met at those dances — except maybe he seemed, oh — gayer — nicer."

She stopped then. "That's about — how it happened, Mr. Roy Marshall."

"And I said my name was Johnny Wilson? Did I have any papers or anything?"

"I never asked to see any papers. You said you were Johnny Wilson and I believed you. You don't stop to demand —"

"Where did I tell you my home was?"

Her eyebrows knit together. "You're acting as though it were real. It's awfully silly, Johnny. You know all of this —"

"Look," I said. "The future depends on my finding out what happened. Now will you tell me?"

She came back, sat down, looked into my face. "I can't believe it," she said slowly. "Even if what you're saying were true —"

"But I'm not lying. *I'm not lying.* Can't you see that? Why haven't you the decency to see — to give me —"

I checked my words, the fury I could hear in my own voice. The force within me, demanding I break through to the answers.

She must have understood. Somehow she must have known. There was a worried frown on her face. It was glassy, frozen. "Very well. Very well, Johnny. I'll go back over it again. I don't want to do it. But if you insist on this perfectly stupid —"

She didn't quite mean it. I knew there was doubt now. She couldn't be sure.

"I saw you often after that," she said. "You — or this other boy, this one I knew, Johnny Wilson. You told me you came from somewhere out West. Montana, it was. You said you'd been overseas in the war. You didn't want to talk about that.

"My family saw you — they knew I was — falling, as they put it. They didn't approve. They were smarter than I was. Much smarter. My father told me you weren't any good. He said I couldn't trust you.

"The only one who liked you was Edna. She liked you from the start, Johnny. She said you had good manners, even if your language was rough because you'd been in the Army. None of them guessed what you really were.

"I'm afraid I was — in love. In love with someone who didn't exist. I thought everything he said was wonderful. One night — one night we eloped. Down to Maryland. I admit I didn't know much about him. I'd never met his family. Didn't know what his future was. But I believed in him. I didn't think anything else mattered."

"This Johnny Wilson," I broke in, "did he have any money? Did he tell you what his plans were? Where he intended you and he would live?"

She kept looking at me. "No. Not much. A hundred dollars or so, he told me. It wasn't enough to keep us. Which was the reason — when we came back — we lived here —"

"We stayed in this apartment?"

"Yes. Of course."

"That was why they all knew me,

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hen. The doorman. The boy on the levator."

"Oh. Yes, they knew you. It wasn't o bad at first. We had fun together. *The New York Sun* had our picture on the society page — Happy Newlyweds. Then — things began to change. I couldn't understand.

"The man I married didn't want to work — didn't want any kind of job. Dad offered him a chance in the banking firm but he said no. Sometimes he'd talk about some wild farming idea — about modernized equipment and — it didn't make sense.

"There were arguments. Ugly quarrels. Then he began staying out — this Johnny I'm talking about. Two — three nights — getting home at dawn. Never saying where he was. And then — then he just didn't come home at all."

"Didn't come home?" I repeated. "You mean — he walked out?"

She nodded. "That's what happened. He walked out. Vanished. A few nights later there was a phone call. That was — Johnny calling. I thought — I thought you'd been drinking too much, the way you sounded. You said you were all right. You said you had to see me, right away. So we made a date to meet at some place near 59th Street. It was called the Hi Jinks Bar."

"The Hi Jinks Bar," I said. "That was where I stopped day before yesterday. After — after I came to."

"I went down there. I met you. You were drunk, Johnny. And there was a girl with you, a cheap little blonde. Her name was Evie, you told me. Evie Hart. Your manners weren't the best, Johnny. You said you were living alone. And liking it. You gave me the address — some place on Second Avenue. You said any time I wanted to find you — I could look you up there.

"I couldn't stand any more of that. I ran out of the place.

"I hated you so much then. I talked it over with my family. Dad and Aunt Edna. Dad said he'd warned me but I wouldn't listen. But he'd help me out. He'd make all the plans so there would be a divorce without too much trouble. I sat down and wrote you that letter, telling you it was over."

"That was all you knew — all you heard from me — until yesterday when you got the call from McCormick?"

"No. No, that wasn't all. About four days ago — I got a call. It was from that girl — Evie Hart. She said she had to talk to me. She said she thought you were in danger. She didn't say what from. But she thought I ought to warn you."

"Why did she call you — if I wasn't staying here?"

"She didn't know where you were. The way she sounded, I knew — I thought anyway — it was important. So — so I tried the one place she hadn't thought of — the Hi Jinks Bar. I went down there. You were in the place alone.

"We had a talk but it wasn't very happy. I told you about the call. It was the only thing that could have made me come to see you. I told you about her warning. I said even though we'd broken up I couldn't let you be in danger, when I could warn you."

"Carol — that was —"

"You didn't care. You were getting drunk again. You laughed it off. You said nobody could hurt you. You said you didn't care what happened anyway. I said good night — and went out."

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"Was I in Army clothes all that time?"

"Army clothes? Don't be silly, Johnny. You bought that suit yourself, a couple of weeks after I met you. The one you're wearing now. You said you used some of your discharge money."

I was sure her story was the truth. The way she told it, the words she used, the way it fitted into facts I knew already — all of it convinced me it was straight. She wasn't involved, she wasn't linked with murder in the Park Towers.

She drew a cigarette out of the enameled box on the table. I struck a match and held it for her while she lit the cigarette.

I didn't want to speak. I didn't want to speak because I was beginning to realize fully the responsibility I had to take for this girl, for the whole business.

I said, "I'm afraid I haven't much respect for Johnny Wilson."

"No," she agreed. "I don't think he's — he's worth much respect."

She said it slowly, definitely, putting the words down, daring me to shake them off.

I told her I was sorry. It sounded cheap and silly but I told her. "I can't make any excuses. Except that I was — you might say sick. I wasn't in my right mind."

She had turned away. She smoked the cigarette and exhaled and watched the blue smoke coil upward. "You say you were shot. You say you woke up on the subway — went to that barroom and found — that happened the day after I saw you — the day after Evie

I stood up. We faced each other

"Yes. She must have known, mu have felt I should be warned. That w what she said in the room — that sh warned me about it. About going dow there, she put it."

"Who was she warning you agains Johnny?"

"I haven't any idea. I haven't th haziest notion —"

"I see." She was smiling again. was hard to tell what she meant b the smile.

I said, "The trouble I'm in isn your fault, Carol. I know that. I'r sorry that I or — or Johnny Wilson c whatever you want to believe — gc you mixed up in it."

"When you say it that way, I —"

"You have to believe that much," told her. "I'm sorry as hell it happenec Whatever jam I'm in — stay clear o it. Give it a wide berth. As wide as yo can."

"How do you mean that?"

"Just the way I said it. Why tha dope Johnny Wilson threw over a gooc deal like you — for that blonde and pile of trouble — I don't know."

She smiled. "That sounds almos like —"

"I'm involved in the thing. The po lice think I killed Captain Curtis. may have done it. I haven't wanted tc believe it but I may have done it. don't know. Anyway you're out of it."

"I was so sure," she said. "Before you came in — there wasn't any doubt Now —"

"Maybe you'll wind up by believing me. But I'm doing the only thing know how to do now — moving out. Anything you want to do — any legal action — that's all right with me."

Hart called to give that warning —"

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across the table. I held out my hand. After an instant's pause, she reached out. Her hand was firm, warm against mine.

I said, "Goodbye, Carol. I'm sorry for the ride."

"Goodbye, Johnny." Then, "You — you left some things here, you know. Not much but — I'll get them for you."

She was back in a few minutes. She had in her hand an odd collection of masculine items. There was a pair of pajamas and a white shirt, a tooth brush and a razor and a black comb. There was also a baggage check from the check room at Grand Central.

"You left these," she told me. "You might as well take them along."

I took them from her. She got some paper and string from the kitchen and helped me to wrap them up. She put a final knot in the string, made sure it was tight and handed me the package. "There," she said. "That ought to stay together all right."

"Fine. That'll do fine."

Later that afternoon I managed to lose the two shadows from Headquarters. It was in Times Square in the middle of the rush hour. I ducked out of an express train onto a local. The detectives couldn't fight their way through the crowd in the express fast enough to keep up with me.

It didn't mean very much. They had new pictures of me now and a full description. They could get out wanted circulars all over the nation in a matter of hours. I wouldn't get very far if I tried to run out. But it was a kind of private, personal satisfaction. It gave me a breathing spell for a few minutes.

I got out at Fiftieth Street and started walking back downtown. I was heading for Grand Central. I had the check in my pocket. The baggage check Carol had given me. I had to find out what it was for. I had an idea it might be the barracks bag I couldn't find.

The man in the baggage room had to hunt for some time before he located the package.

It looked like a shoe box. It was wrapped up in brown paper. I took it from him, paid the checking fee, started back across the station.

I was afraid to open it. I kept on walking, past the information booth. I found a spot in the waiting room, off to myself. There wasn't anyone close enough to watch. It took me a couple of minutes to get it opened. My hands fumbled as I undid the cord.

It was a white cardboard shoe box. I lifted the cover. There was tissue paper inside. I pushed it aside.

Resting there — cradled in the tissue paper — was a .45 automatic. A loaded clip lay loose on the top of the barrel.

CHAPTER EIGHT

It was dark when I got back to the room on Second Avenue. I stood outside the door of the room. I could hear muffled noises inside. I put the key in the lock, pushed the door open, walked in.

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There were no lights on. In the darkness, I heard sobbing. It was a woman crying. I walked over to the lamp and turned the switch.

Evie Hart sat in the frayed armchair. She'd been sitting there — alone in the dark — weeping. Her eyes were red and her makeup was smeared. She looked up and tried to smile at me. She said, "I'm sorry. I'm really a stupid little fool, aren't I?"

"I don't know," I said. "I don't know what — why you're here even."

She had a lace handkerchief in her hand and dried her eyes. She looked like a bad little girl. "I had to come back, Johnny. I had to see you, I couldn't help it."

"It was pretty slick," I told her. "Writing down that fake phone number."

"You tried to call me?"

"Yes, Evie. I tried. There were just a few items I thought you might know that might be helpful."

She sat with her hands over her knees, her head tilted a little to one side. I sat down on the cot, stretched out, leaning on one elbow so I could watch her.

"Why'd you give me the phoney number, Evie?"

"Because I was afraid. I knew you weren't the same. I knew — something had happened."

"I figured that was it. You knew I wasn't Johnny Wilson — not any more. You were wise the moment I came in here."

"The moment you kissed me. You weren't —" Her eyes glistened. She was still close to tears. "If you want it cold, Johnny — I was perfectly aware, all along, who you were. Your name wasn't really Johnny. It was Roy Marshall."

"All along?"

"From the start. From before I met you even. I knew you were walking around in a daze. I was sorry, after I got to know you. I wished —"

I sat up. For the second time that day I was tracking down myself. Trying to get facts — from a girl. A girl who knew me, even when I didn't know her.

"That night," I said, "that night I came back here — you knew what had happened? Knew I'd changed?"

"I decided — to be frank, Johnny. I decided it must have been the shock of — after they shot at you."

"After — who shot at me?"

There was coquettish reproof in her eyes. She wasn't going that far.

I told her then how it had happened. There wasn't any point in holding back. Get as much as I could by telling as much as I could. Force her to give me the rest, to fill in gaps I didn't know.

"Some of those papers," she admitted, "came out of your khaki suit. In the back pocket of the trousers was an Army identification card — made out to Roy Marshall. Also some sort of luggage check. And odds and ends — a couple of theater programs and stubs."

"And — the letter from Curtis?"

"Yes. You said the papers were junk and for me to tear everything up and toss the soldier suit out. I tore up the Army card, Johnny, and the luggage check. I meant to destroy that letter from Curtis too — but I must have tossed it down on the desk with some of the other stuff and then — forgot

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about it, I guess."

A second luggage check tangled in this thing. Evie had destroyed this one.

"But if those papers were there — if the Curtis letter was on the desk — I must have read them."

"You read them, Johnny. They didn't make any impression. You didn't grasp the meaning. You acted like it — belonged to somebody else. Like it just got mixed up with your stuff accidentally."

Some of it started to piece together.

At the time just after the murder — I figured from what Evie said I told her — I'd taken a rented room somewhere downtown. Then — the blitzkrieg romance with Carol, and elopement. I'd bought a cheap overnight bag, stuffed in it the few belongings I had with me.

"Your quarrels with Carol got bitter," Evie said. "So you walked out. You and I — we knew each other by then. I found you this room here on Second Avenue. Oh, I didn't live here with you, exactly. But you were here. It was a kind of hideout where we could be together when we wanted."

I'd brought along that overnight bag when I walked out. Evie had gone through it. That was when she tore up the papers and threw out the soldier suit.

"You didn't want the bag, either," she said. "You told me to take it, Johnny. If you want it —"

I shook my head. It wasn't important. But I wondered about the luggage check. That might have been for the barracks bag I couldn't find.

The barracks bag had my discharge papers and service records. Also my dog tags. I'd piled everything in there. I'd wanted to leave that hospital starting out fresh. The Red Cross people had even given me a new wallet. The only thing I'd had in it was my discharge money.

But where I'd checked the barracks bag — where it was now — I had no idea.

I looked at the tawdry little creature. "But how did you get in this?" I asked her. "What sort of accident ever —"

"It wasn't any accident. It was quite deliberate."

She swung her legs up over the arm of the chair. I watched her light a cigarette.

"I'm going to tell you," she said slowly. "I'd like to help you, Johnny — as much as — as much as I dare to. I had a job to do. An assignment. *You* were the assignment. I had to get you away from that girl — from Carol. Any way I could figure —"

"But nobody knew who I was — where I was. I married her as Johnny Wilson —"

"Sure. Only you let them run your picture in the paper. Happy newlyweds! Mr. and Mrs. John Wilson. The coppers weren't so smart. And they didn't have any pictures, except old ones."

"It was somebody I knew — somebody —"

"We knew what you looked like. I went up to the house and hung around, until I saw you come out. My ankle turned and I stumbled. Of course, you helped me. And we walked along — it's easy, when a girl makes up her mind to something. I got you to buy me a drink. One drink. Two drinks. Three drinks."

"That was how it began?"

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"You were — you'd had too much. I got you to the room, up here —"

One drink. Two drinks. Three drinks. Let's go out and have ourselves a time. Get a dame. Get some liquor —

It was the pattern you lived in the Army, when you had the chance. Take what you can today. Don't worry about tomorrow. That was how you lived and thought.

Evie had played on it. I'd gotten drunk. Gone with her —

"They said get you drunk. Get you drunk and keep you drunk. Get you out of that house — away from Carol and the rest of those people. It took a few days in the doing —"

"I said, "But why? What was the idea? What — who was giving the orders?"

"I'm telling you what I can, Johnny. I had to find out what the score was. Whether you were faking or not. If so —why?"

"You found out?"

"Some of it. You weren't faking. You were sick — you should have been in a hospital. You didn't know who you were. Oh, nobody would see it on the surface. But when you're with somebody a while —"

"When you saw I was sick — then what?"

"You seemed to fall for me, Johnny. I guess because we drank a lot together. You kept telling me how Carol didn't understand you. You said I was the kind of girl could be a pal. I got you to move out of the house — over to the room here. The rent — I've been paying that."

"All of this because — somebody was giving you instructions? Because —"

"I didn't mind it at the beginning. It was like a game. An exciting game — with people for pieces. But after you got over here — it changed."

"Oh?"

"Don't look like that. You don't have to believe it. I liked you, Johnny. I was sorry for you. I knew you were in trouble. You didn't seem to know the trouble you were in — or if you did, you didn't care."

"The others didn't believe me at first when I told them your memory was gone. After they did believe it, they began to get scared. Maybe you'd recover. Maybe you'd get well. And the moment you did —"

"So they decided — to put a bullet in my back."

She looked away from me. "I knew about it. They had a code word. They gave it to me over the phone, downstairs. I was waiting here for you. I'd called them up. You came in. You must have been suspicious —"

"How do you mean?"

"We came up here together. You tried to force me to tell you what — who I was talking to, what it was about. I wouldn't tell you. You went on out, left me here. I began — to worry. I began to realize — I didn't want you to get hurt. I got desperate. So I called — I called up Carol. I thought maybe you'd gone there. But you hadn't —"

No — I hadn't been with Carol. I'd been down at the Hi Jinks Bar. Carol had gone there and found me — so she could give me Evie's warning.

"I stayed in the room till you came home," Evie went on. "You wouldn't listen to me. You said Carol had been talking to you. You said to hell with all women. You practically threw me

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ut of here and then —"

"Then I went out the next morning. hey were waiting to ambush me —"

"I wanted you to leave the night be- ore. I said if we could get away to- ether — I was scared. I came back the ext day. I've got my own key to this oom. I sat here and waited. I didn't now what had happened —"

"Weren't you pretty much in danger ourself, Evie — if they ever found ut?"

"If they found out I was tipping you ff? I'd end up in the bottom of the iver. Poor little Evie Hart. Built for reakage. I didn't much care. You see, I liked you —"

She was snuffing out the cigarette. Her skirt had fallen back so that her legs showed, white and shapely, above the stockings. There was brazen uncon- cern in her manner.

It was blatant. Part of the technique. Make it obvious and easy. The direct approach. With Johnny, it seemed to have worked.

But I wasn't drunk now. My mind wasn't sick any more. I saw her as she was: A shabby blonde. Poison ivy. A tart working for people who'd tried to kill me.

Only — she had tried to warn me about it. That was straight. Because she'd called Carol and Carol had come to see me.

Put the pieces together. See how they fit. The thing was clearer now than it had been, part of it. Somehow they'd known about me. They hadn't known where I was. Not until the picture in the paper. Then they'd sent out little Evie.

Why?

What had these people known about me? Why were they terrified that I might recover?

It was tied to the death of Captain Curtis. It was all part of the same pic- ture, it fitted into the weird pattern of those past weeks.

"Your pals were scared," I told her. "They were scared because of what I knew."

She had a pleading expression. "Don't ask too much, Johnny. Don't try to know —"

"I've got to know."

She kicked off her shoes. They dropped with a little clatter to the floor. "Sorry, Johnny. But —"

"They were scared," I repeated. "Scared I might get well, might remem- ber them, might be able to tell the police who they were."

"Don't talk so loud. And not like that, either. You don't want any more trouble —"

She opened her purse which lay be- side her on the arm of the chair, took out an amber comb.

"Evie, I'm playing for — important stakes."

"You wouldn't try getting rough."

"I don't want to. But maybe that's what you understand. I want the whole damn story. With nothing left out."

I was edging toward that writing table. I'd chucked the two packages there. The automatic in the shoe box. If I could get to it, get that box opened, I'd have a weapon. I wouldn't put in the clip. It wouldn't be loaded — but Evie wouldn't know that. I'd have a way to make her talk.

"Johnny —"

"Yeah?"

"I wouldn't do that."

"Wouldn't — what?"

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"Wouldn't move any closer," she spoke slowly. "To those packages on the table."

Her hand had gone swiftly back to her purse. This time — when it came out — those thin, tapering fingers held a gun. I've never seen a gun so small. Just big enough to fit in the palm of her hand.

It was like a toy. But it wasn't a toy. There was deadliness in its shape, in the short barrel. I figured it would fire a single .22 calibre bullet. At that close range, you couldn't miss.

"Stay there, Johnny. I'd fire if I had to."

"I'll bet you would, Evie."

She got up, out of the chair. There was ugliness in the taut lines of her face, the deep shadows under the cheek-bones.

"That was so obvious. Heading for your gun like that. Like a two-bit hero in a two-bit western. You ought to take lessons."

"I — I don't pretend to be good at it. Maybe I'll learn with experience — if I live that long."

"If you do — yes."

She was edging toward the door. Keeping that gun leveled at me. Her eyes boring into me.

"What were you going to do?" she asked, with a little laugh. "Shoot me?"

"I don't know, Evie. I was hoping there was some way I could make you see — you had to tell me the truth. I was hoping —"

"You hoping! You jerk! What are you trying to do — get proof on yourself? Tie yourself up so tight the devil himself couldn't get you loose?"

"You don't understand. I'm not trying to run out on this thing. If I did it then I'll have to —"

"*If* you did it! Johnny — you were walking for a gun then, weren't you? You were edging over to it, weren't you? Why? Because you wanted a gun in your hand. Because that's what you are. Because you're a murderer. Because —"

"That's a lie —"

"Is it? You killed one man, Johnny. Killed him in cold blood. I'm not guessing about that. I don't know what else you've done. But I'm not aiming to be next."

I said, "Cut the melodrama. Put up your cap pistol and let's — talk it over."

"No." It was defiant. "No, Johnny. I came up here, wanted to help you as much as I could. I didn't realize before. Not until you started moving toward those packages. You've got a gun over here. I didn't need you to tell me. You should have seen your expression!"

"My expression? I was —"

"Obeying that impulse. That's what I could see, Johnny. It was there in your face. It goes deep inside you. You want to kill. That's what your urge is. That's why —"

She had slipped on her shoes. She was at the door. She put her hand behind her and turned the knob. The gun was still pointed at me.

"I thought we might go away together. Wasn't I lucky you didn't take me up? Sooner or later, you would have —"

It sounded like a sob in her voice. "I tried to help you," she said. "I tried to. I told you what I could. But I'm not getting into any jam with them by spilling out names. You were silly to think I would. Why they'd —"

Her coat and hat were lying on the

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chair by the door. She picked them up. She stood in the hall, just beyond the door. With exaggerated slow motion, she put the gun away in her purse. She slipped on the coat and adjusted the hat so the black feather stuck up at a jauntry angle.

"So long," she told me airily. "I saw coppers outside, watching. They didn't pay any attention when I came in. Maybe they'll try to tail me. It won't matter. I know how to handle flatfeet."

"Sure," I said. "You're — a smart number, Evie."

She said, "Good night now."

You killed one man already.

That business about my being born for murder — she was putting it on. Putting it on to make me believe it myself.

But the first part she meant. The part about my killing Curtis. I'd pulled the trigger. You couldn't doubt her, the way she'd thrown those words at me.

You killed one man already. I couldn't get that sentence out of my mind. I walked up and down the room, after she was gone, trying to think.

She'd been sitting there crying, sobbing to herself, when I came in. The tears weren't fake. But what were they all about? Why had she come there? The line about liking me — wanting to help me — I didn't go for that. Evie worried about — Evie.

If she was so damned frightened, why had she told me about how they knew who I was, even before she met me? Why had she told me how the meeting was staged — with that twisted ankle on Central Park West?

There had to be a reason. Some reason she would pour out so much — and no more.

Maybe she wanted to talk, to tell the whole thing. Maybe she wanted to break loose from them, to get free. And fear held her back. Fear that let her say so much, and then it stopped her tongue.

I wanted to run down the stairs after her. To grab those detectives outside and tell them to pick this girl up. She knows who the others are. She can tell you.

But it wasn't any go. They'd have their alibis ready made. And every one would tie me tighter to the murder. The only hope was to stay clear. Stay clear long enough to get the whole story.

You wanted a gun in your hand. She was wrong. Wrong as hell. I'd killed. They'd taught me to kill. I'd done it enough on the deals we had out there. I'd opened up with the carbine and watched human beings crumple up under the bullets.

But it doesn't make you a beast. You don't get to enjoy it. You don't like blood any better, or the stench of rotting bodies.

You killed one man already. . . . I'm not aiming to be next. . . .

I thought about my parents. I wanted to call them. To talk to them. To talk to people I knew, people I loved.

But I couldn't call them now.

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CHAPTER NINE

I HAVEN'T any idea what woke me up. It was odd. I was fully — instantly — awake. No foggy moment of trying to recall what the place was — why I was here. My mind — my senses — were alert.

There's deadly quiet in night, even in New York. A few spasmodic noises came through the window. A truck speeding down the deserted avenue. A ship letting out a moaning blast. The sudden screech of a car's brakes.

Mostly it was quiet. A kind of humming quiet. It seemed to buzz against your ears.

Carol was in my mind. Carol in the white dress, across from me in the breakfast room. Trying to tell me about her romance with Johnny Wilson. Telling it with that air of bravado she put on. Not daring to let herself believe my story might be true.

Your thoughts jump in the dark. Faces of the others in Carol's apartment danced before me. That pompous, fishy-eyed lawyer: The aloof, unreachable Mr. Eaton. Edna with the slick hairdo and the fluffy manner.

Edna puzzled me most. That expression on her face stayed in my mind. It was pity but also more than pity. It was like a warning. But she had nothing to warn me about. Not unless she — or the others — were involved in the death of Curtis.

The night before I'd been in a cell. They'd let me out. You're free. You're free, Johnny. Or Roy. Or whatever your name is.

But you're not really free. You know that. You're hemmed in. Hemmed in by things you don't remember, by people you don't even know.

Not just the police. Not just Carol or Evie or the others. You're in combat. You're fighting yourself. The other half of you. That's what you're trying to track down.

You killed one man already. . . .

I heard a noise. I was sure of it. Not like the other noises, the infrequent sounds in the night outside. It was sharper, like the click of a closing door. Only not close by.

You think you hear things when you don't. A creak in the stair. Something falling to the floor in an apartment below. In the dark the sound stands out, grows in your mind.

A kind of shuffling step. I was sure of it now. It wasn't imagination. I sat up, cursing my jumpy nerves. He was coming up the stairs, whoever it was. Slowly. Laboriously. As though it were a long climb. The steps had personality of their own. Not heavy or plodding. It was a kind of scraping tread. The sounds came closer.

In the darkness, I fumbled for the shoe box on the table, the box with the automatic. I remembered Evie's words: *You were reaching for a gun.*

I took out the automatic. I found the clip, snapped it into place.

The steps were nearer. They reached the landing. Then they stopped and I didn't hear anything.

I waited. Not more than half a minute but it seemed longer. Whoever was out there must have been trying to decide which was the right door. He couldn't have gone into any other apart-

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nent or I would have heard.

The steps started again. He was outside the door now. Standing there. Standing not twenty feet distant, only that door and the darkness between us.

My fingers released the safety catch on the automatic.

The knocking came. Three sharp little raps. The sound crackled in the darkness.

I stepped across the room, switched on the lamp. I moved close against the wall, a few feet from the door. He'd have to come through that door into the room before he could see where I was.

The knocking again, sharper and insistent. He knew I was there.

"What do you want?"

A moment's silence. Then, "Marshall? Roy Marshall?"

"Who wants him?"

"I — it's something important."

The voice was old. It was old and withered. I said, "Must be important, waking anybody up this time of night."

"Have to see him," the man said. "Have to see him tonight."

"What's your name?"

"I can't tell you now. Allow me to come inside, please."

After an instant I said, "I've got a gun. I'll open the door. Come in with your hands high."

I pulled back the slide of the automatic, jerking a bullet into the chamber. I let the slide bang forward into place. I moved a step forward, reached out and turned the knob. Then I stepped back quickly against the wall.

The door swung open on its hinges. It opened slow, like something in a stage play. I didn't move.

The door banged against a chair. I saw the man move forward into the room. With his foot, he kicked the door closed. His hands were over his head. In one hand he held a small package done up in brown paper.

He was a small man. Five feet three or four inches. He wore a shabby black hat. You could see tufts of gray hair under it.

The coat was gray and worn, frayed at the cuffs. But I noticed he wore spats, mudcaked spats on top of unshined, battered black shoes.

His face was pale. Pale with a whiteness. The lips were small. The cheeks hollow. The eyes were set close together. They had a whiteness about them, too. Even the pupils were pale, lusterless. The man was staring at me but I wondered if he could see.

My finger was on the trigger of the gun. Evie's voice ran in my mind. *You wanted a gun in your hand.* "You can lower your hands," I told him. "Only —be careful. I can fire quicker than you can get out a gun."

"Yes, young man. Yes, I know."

He took off the hat, put it on the table. He had a full shock of uncombed grayish-white hair. He opened the coat, removed it slowly. He was wearing a shiny dark suit.

"What's the package?" I asked him.

"For you. I brought it for you. You —you are Mr. Marshall?"

"What's it all about?"

"I hope you will understand," he told me in that queer, faded tone. "I'm an old man. This is important to me."

"Sure, sure. But — what? What's important?"

"I have — something — to tell you."

"Okay. Why's it so damned vital?"

"I came the back way," he said with a

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little laugh. "They didn't see me. No one saw me. They don't know I'm here."

"Who didn't see you?"

"Detectives. Didn't you know? They're outside. They're watching the house. Checking up on who comes in and who goes out. Only they didn't see me. I sneaked in — through the backyard."

The eyebrows arched and he smiled, an empty pitiful kind of smile.

"I'm not here for trouble," he said slowly. "No trouble. Could you —could you put away that gun?"

"It stays in my hand," I told him. "With the safety off. Who in the hell are you?"

"I would like to tell you who — who I am. I am aware you — you are in trouble, son. I would like — you see —"

He hesitated. I felt sorry for him, whoever and whatever he was. He didn't like this business. I said, "Keep talking."

"But I came here only to help you. It may be difficult to understand. But I assure you it is the gospel truth. I am here to help."

"You never even saw me before."

"Even so — I know about you. The trouble you are in. That is why I have brought you — that — that object on the chair. It wouldn't be safe in other hands. In no hands but your own."

The way he talked didn't sound real. It wasn't natural. He sounded as if he were reciting a speech he'd memorized.

"What's in the package?"

"I — I would rather you didn't open it — until I have gone."

"*You* open it. You open it now."

He shook his head. "I —"

"Open it up!" I moved a step toward him, my hand tight on the trigger.

He shook his head again, staring at me dully with a vacant, terrified expression.

Cold rage seemed to freeze me. This man had come here, had brought this package with him. And now he stood before me with an insane, mute defiance. I knew he wasn't going to tell me any more than he wanted to tell me.

I wanted to kill him. I realized it in that moment. It was a sickening sensation. I was afraid — afraid with sweaty fear — but not of the others. I was afraid of myself, of the impulse surging inside me. Squeeze that trigger just a fraction tighter. Let the bullet blast into his body.

That's how you make him talk. . . .

For an instant my vision blurred. I rubbed my free hand across my eyes.

There were the police downstairs. I could turn him over to them. This was proof. This was one of the gang. He was working with them. He had this package.

He seemed to read my thoughts, "Yes," he said, "you can call the police. Of course you can. But it really wouldn't be the smartest thing. Not with this package —"

"You're pretty wise," I said. "You got all the answers. You think I wouldn't dare —"

"But it wouldn't help you any. What's inside there — would only make them more certain. I only brought it to help you. Because it's something — it would be best in your hands. Safer."

The little package sat on the chair. Wrapped up in brown paper. He only brought it to help me, he said. I could turn him over to the police. But if that package were some piece of evidence,

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something that would make them more certain of my guilt, I'd be cutting my own throat.

I didn't want police in on it. I had to play my own game, all the way through. I had to get the pieces and put them together.

"You mustn't threaten," he said. "I'm trying to do something for you. Something helpful. My life isn't of much use to anybody. But perhaps I can do something useful now. One thing. One small contribution —"

He didn't say it. He declaimed it, like a bad actor doing Shakespeare.

"I've worked for him, too," he said. "Quite a time now."

"That's fine. That's fine. I suppose *he* is part of that gang."

"Part of the gang?" He laughed. It seemed amusing to him. He repeated the phrase several times, shaking his head. "You might say that. I had to work for him. So did the others. There isn't any question of what you must do, you know. Like the little girl."

"What little girl?"

"Evie. Evie Hart. You know her. The one who sings. Only she doesn't sing so much any more."

"You all — work for him?"

"You try to break free but you can't. That's the wonderful part. You can't get loose. Nothing holds you. Nobody holds you. Except yourself."

He smiled. "Only now, you see, I want to break away. That's the reason. That's why I came down here. I came down here to help you. Because I don't want to work with him any more. That's doing something, isn't it?"

There was lunacy in the voice, in the way he looked, the emptiness of his eyes as he spoke.

"I stole the package," he said. "Stole it from them because I heard them talking. They said it was important. Terribly important. They would see that it got into the right hands — at the right time."

"What hands — were the right hands?"

"The police," he answered quickly. "The police. That was what they said. And I'm certain it was right. But it can't do them any good now. It can't do them any good because you've got it."

He reached over and picked up his coat and hat. I watched him struggle into the coat. He held the hat in his hands, twisting it.

"Evie talked with you, didn't she? She told you about them? About him, didn't she?"

"She told me — some things." I stopped myself from saying more. He was here to get information, to find out how much Evie had spilled earlier that night. "She didn't say anything to incriminate anybody, if that's what you mean."

"It isn't — it isn't," he assured me. "You should know as much as — as you can, for your protection. You must realize that. You should take her advice."

"Her advice?"

"It doesn't matter to me. Only you —you must be careful. You most of all. You must understand that. I am trying to make myself very clear."

"You're doing one hell of a job."

He had the door half opened. "Take her advice," he said. "Take her advice and get away from here. You must — see what I mean."

He was bowing to me. Bowing like a

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Chinese servant. I could have stopped him from leaving. But I didn't. I watched him back out through the door. He closed it softly behind him.

I picked up that package. I didn't like playing with a possible booby trap. I handled that little gift as if it were a land mine I was trying to defuse.

But I got it opened finally, got the brown paper spread out flat. Inside was a round, flat, shiny black object.

For one moment I thought it might be some kind of grenade. Then I realized what it was — a roll of movie film bound up with rubber bands.

I took off the bands, let the film uncoil so I could see what was on it. There were no pictures at all. Only a thin, wavy, thread-like white line running up the center of the film.

But I remembered. I knew what this thing was. I'd seen films like it before. Seen them at the Army storerooms in that loft building on West 44th Street. That building where they'd brought us two or three times from Halloran Hospital to do assorted jobs as part of the rehabilitation idea.

I'd had to examine and list film like this in those inventories I made. It wasn't movie film. It was a sound track. The kind the Army and Navy used with their special new dictaphones. The kind they kept on hand in the storeroom to test out this kind of machine.

That zigzagging white line was a record of sounds. Sounds — voices — set down on film. Frozen so you couldn't escape them, so the words could plague you, even when you didn't remember.

CHAPTER TEN

I PACED the floor of that room, trying to think. The sound track lay on the table. I could get rid of it if I wanted. Destroy it. Burn it. Or I could turn it over to the cops. Serve it up on a silver platter.

That was probably what the old man figured I'd do. That was why he brought it to me. Stumble over yourself. Be the fall guy. Hand it in to McCormick, free for nothing.

Only I wouldn't. I couldn't destroy it or turn it in. Not until I knew what was there. Whose voices — what words they spewed out.

There wasn't much time. I couldn't tell how long McCormick would leave me on that leash. Maybe a day. Maybe even two. More likely it was a matter of hours.

I had to get hold of one of those machines. One of those dictaphones like the Army and Navy used. I had to run off that sound track. Run it off alone, with nobody else around to hear.

There was one place I knew. The place where I'd seen the machines — the Army Quartermaster storerooms on the two top floors of that loft building on West 44th Street.

They probably didn't worry much about thieves. Not with guards on duty to check packages coming in and going out. I had to get down there. Somehow I had to get into the place. I knew the

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dangers. But that didn't seem to matter. At least this way I'd have a chance of getting answers. Answers on the sound track, on this chunk of past I couldn't remember.

Only — time was short. There couldn't be any delay. I'd have to make the try now.

It would have to be tonight.

The automatic lay beside the sound track on the table. It was bulky. I managed to shove it into my back pocket. When I had my overcoat on, it wouldn't make any noticeable bulge.

The roll of film I wrapped in the brown paper the old man brought it in. I slipped it into the side pocket of my suit coat.

I switched off the light, stood in darkness. The first job I had was to get out of this place without being seen by those detectives watching downstairs.

The old man said he'd ducked up an alley and come in through a back door. That sounded like the best route for me to take going out.

There was another way. A ladder in the hall outside leading up to a skylight that opened to the roof. I could get up there — across those roofs and down through some building police weren't watching.

The back door seemed better. I opened my own door and was about to start down the stairs. Then I stopped. I could hear sounds on the first floor. Heavy, tramping footsteps.

It was three or four men. They were talking. I heard one say, "Sure, it came from McCormick. Somebody phoned him a hot tip. Got a couple of questions I want to ask."

They were starting up the stairs. No time left now. The ladder. Wooden, splintery rungs against your hands. The cumbersome overcoat getting in the way. A freezing blast of wind as I climbed out to the roof. Three men were just reaching the top landing. I could hear their voices through the open skylight.

"Here's his hole."

"Too bad — busting up his beauty sleep."

They began pounding on the door.

I started across the roof. It was a jungle of misshapen shadows looming in the dark. Ventilators and chimneys and railings. Radio wires and clothes lines. Wooden boxes and broken chairs.

You had to feel your way. You never knew when there might be a break between the roofs — a courtyard or alleyway. One misstep could plunge you over the side.

There were sounds behind me. I turned and saw figures emerging from the skylight. It was the three detectives. They were shining flashlights but I was several buildings away and they couldn't spot me.

There was a space of about three feet between the roof I was on and the next one. I hesitated a moment, standing on the edge. I had to make the jump. I flung myself forward, sprawling to the surface of roof on the other side. I got to my feet. There was a shack of some kind close to me. It looked like the roof entrance to a stairs going down.

I dived behind it, fumbled in the darkness until I found what felt like a latch. I lifted it and a door swung open. There were stairs leading down to a dimly lit lower floor.

It was another shoddy, smelly tenement. I got down the narrow, uncar-

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peted stairs to the first floor out to the vestibule. I halted there, peering through the glass in the door. This was about five buildings up from the tenement where my room was. It was near the corner.

I couldn't see anybody on the street. Apparently those three detectives were all McCormick had assigned to watch me. They were still up on the roof.

I pushed out through the door, swung the corner quickly, staying close to the buildings. *Get to the subway. Get downtown. Get over to that loft building.*

My footsteps sounded hollow against the pavements as I started up the deserted sidestreet toward Lexington Avenue.

The loft building towered into the night. I stood in a doorway across the street.

No lights in the windows. But there was light on the first floor, just inside the entrance. I could see two men lolling in chairs by the elevator door, smoking, talking to each other. An elevator operator. And one of the night watchmen.

I tried to remember the layout. Vaguely I recalled there was a latrine in the back on the first floor. That might be the way. In through the latrine window and then up the stairs. There was a narrow alley at the side of the building. I crossed the street quickly, started up the alleyway.

It was pitch black. I groped forward. I couldn't afford a mistake. Knocking into anything — making any sudden noise — would alert those men by the elevator.

There were two windows on the ground floor level. But they had bars in front of them and I knew there wasn't any chance of getting in that way.

I was about to try that rear door when I heard voices. They seemed to be coming closer. I dropped back, ducked down behind two of the ash cans.

The door opened. It was iron and made a clangy sound. Two men came out. They were large, hefty men. They stopped a minute in the doorway. One of them was lighting a cigarette.

The other man stood looking at the ash cans. Then he started over in my direction. He came to within two feet of where I was crouching. I could smell the sooty odor that clung to his clothes.

I held myself taut. It was like times in the Pacific when you lay in a hole with an enemy sniper close by, waiting for you to snap a twig. But there weren't any twigs now. You had concrete under you and ash cans for cover.

"Okay, Eddie. We start get these out now."

It was the one near me. He had a guttural accent. It sounded Polish.

"Yeah," the other said. "Too damn full, these cans. I roll 'em out."

He grabbed one of the ash cans, tilted it back and started rolling it down the alleyway to the street.

I figured the one near me was the janitor. He was alone now, while his helper was rolling that can along the alleyway to the street.

He was still only a few feet from me. He stayed there a couple of minutes, glancing around. Then he muttered words I couldn't catch, walked across the yard and began shifting packing cases that partially blocked the entrance to the alley.

I crawled along the ground, edging

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toward that half-open iron door. It was only about five feet away.

I stuck up my head so I could see over the top of the ash cans. The janitor was about twenty feet across the yard. He was still struggling with those crates.

His back was turned so he couldn't see. It was the moment I needed. I made a dive for the door.

I didn't look behind me. Inside the door were steps going down to the basement. I virtually leapt down those steps, tripping, stumbling to the floor, rolling over, twisting out of the light into the covering shadows of boilers and pipes.

I was about ten feet from the foot of the stairs. I could hear the janitor outside in the yard: "Eddie — you go down those stairs?"

I lay still. After a few seconds, I heard him again, "Hey, Eddie — you down there?"

Eddie must have been coming back down the alley. I heard his voice: "What's all the racket? What's eating you?"

The janitor said, "I thought you go down those stairs —"

"You can see me, can't you?"

"Yeah, but —"

He was starting down the steps. He came down half way. Then he stopped. From where I lay I could see he was looking around.

Luck stayed with me. He looked around, apparently saw nothing suspicious. Then he turned and went back up the steps.

I crawled across the basement on hands and knees. Deep inside the building I could see a red exit light gleaming. I headed for that.

When I was close to it, I stood up. I was too far now from the steps for the men in the yard to see me. I pushed open the exit door.

Beyond the door was a stairway. I started up, a step at a time, trying not to make any sound.

The stairs came out on the main floor near the elevator. I pressed close against the wall. I could see the two men I'd spotted first from across the street. They were still seated in the chairs by the elevator. Still smoking. Their backs toward me.

About fifteen feet away were stairs leading up into the building. It meant a dash across an open space where I could be spotted if either of those two men happened to glance back. Once I reached the stairs I'd be out of their line of vision.

I was watching the two men. One was relighting his pipe. The other had taken off his shoe and was rubbing his foot.

One instant I waited. Then I made the dash. Three long strides and I was across, bounding up the stairs two at a time.

They hadn't heard me. I would have known because there would have been noise as they jumped up but there wasn't any noise. I kept on going.

The ledge was about a foot and a half wide. It ran along the outside of the building on the twelfth floor.

It was the only way of getting in. Doors leading into the storerooms were locked. By the red glow of the exit lights in the stair well I could read the sign: "U.S. Army Quartermaster Corps. Unauthorized Personnel Keep Out."

I got out on the ledge through the stair well window. There were wires on

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the side of the building and I was able to cling to them as I edged forward.

There was a window about a yard distant along that ledge. That would open into the storerooms. If I had to I was ready to smash it with my fist.

But there wasn't any need. That high up they hadn't bothered about locks. Still clinging to the wires, I bent down, pressed my palms against the glass and shoved up. The window lifted.

There was no alarm. No bells clanging. I took a firm grip on the underpart of the window, hoisted myself inside.

I closed the window behind me. I stood a moment while my eyes grew used to the shadows. There was a large hotel sign nearby, red and blue and violet, flashing off and on. When it was on it threw weird colors across the storeroom.

There'd been about a dozen of those machines I was hunting, the way I remembered. They'd been tucked away in one corner. But they weren't there now. The section where they should have been was piled high with a couple of thousand folded-up Army cots.

I'd broken into this place. Taken the gamble. Pulled it off, in spite of the odds. Only now I couldn't find the one thing I came for.

The search had to be methodical. I started at one corner of the storeroom, began working my way along those rows of supplies.

They'd added to this surplus stock since I'd been there. Helmets. Mess kits. Piles of war equipment nobody wanted.

About half way along the second row of supplies, my hand came across cold metal. I couldn't see because it was in the shadows. But it was some kind of mechanical apparatus. It stood about two feet from the floor.

I dragged the thing out into the open section where the light could hit it. The hotel sign came on, throwing a splotchy pattern of bright colors.

In the reddish glow — I could see the machine.

I almost let out a yell in the dark. The long shot had paid off. Gleaming in the half light was the dictaphone. The machine I was certain would play that sound recording.

I got the film from my pocket, took it out of the brown wrapping paper.

I bent down beside the dictaphone. I didn't know much about how it worked. But I did know it was made for use under field conditions. That meant it would operate on dry cells. I wouldn't have to hunt around for a place to plug it in.

It didn't take long to figure the thing out. There was a rod at the top of the machine where you could fit on the roll of film. Under that were two slots and beneath them, at the bottom, an empty spool. You ran the end of the film through those slots and attached it to the spool.

There was a switch on the side of the machine. Apparently that was what you turned to start it working.

I had the film through the two slots. I was about to start attaching it to the spool. Then I heard the noise. It was close by. It was like a door slamming shut.

I pulled back behind a stack of helmets. It was a good spot. The shadows covered me but I could still see along that row.

There was someone moving. I couldn't see him at first but I could hear the sound. He was moving toward

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me. Slowly — unbelievably — like a figure in a pantomime act—he seemed to emerge from the dark.

It was a man. He was small. He was wearing a hat and an overcoat. He had his hands in the side pocket of the coat and he kept coming toward me. That hotel sign was behind him — when the light was on I could see him silhouetted.

It couldn't be the watchman. A watchman wouldn't be slinking through the building this way, in the dark. He'd be shining his flashlight, trying to see what was there.

It was a trap. It was one of that gang. Somehow he'd followed me here. I noticed the way he kept his hands in his pockets. I was sure he was carrying a gun.

He was coming nearer. Waiting until he was close enough. Close enough to be certain of his mark.

He'd come here to destroy me. That was crazy. But instinct told me it was right. You knew it — you could hear it in that measured, even step.

Only ten feet from me now. I couldn't tell if he had spotted me or not. He was standing close to the dictaphone, looking down at it.

Then he spoke. It was startling and unreal, that voice. It didn't sound familiar. Yet he used my name. "Okay. Okay — Roy —"

His hand came out of his pocket. I saw there was something black and shiny in it. It looked like a gun.

I wasn't going to sit there like a squatting target, waiting for him to fire. I lunged forward, throwing myself against him, my hands aiming for his throat. He let out a cry but it was stifled. We rolled against one of those stacks of supplies. Army cots clattered down to the floor. One struck against the side of my head.

He managed to get one hand to my throat. I pulled back, twisted to break the hold. The hotel sign came on and a splash of red light shot across the room. The light gleamed suddenly on the man's face.

I could see him then.

I could see his features. I could see those slanting, Oriental eyes. Surprise — bewilderment — made me slacken my grip.

He pulled away quickly. He was breathing hard. Between deep gasps he said, "Roy — want to — choke me to death?"

It was Spike Yamada. Spike, the Nisei I'd talked with in that cell at Headquarters. The Jap-American who said he was from Army Intelligence.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

I GOT to my feet. Spike was already standing. He was fumbling forward. After a moment's search he found a light switch on the wall nearby. He turned it on. I blinked in the sudden, brilliant glare that lit up the room.

He stood by the wall, looking at me. His eyes glittered.

"Thought you were trying to kill me, Roy. What's holding you back? Just the

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two of us here. You could —"

"You had a gun," I said. "I saw you take it out of your pocket. Out of your coat."

"A gun? You're seeing things. That was a flashlight. Look!"

He pointed to the floor. An ordinary black flashlight lay where I'd knocked it out of his hand when I crashed into him.

Anger flared up inside me. "You trailed me here," I said. "You think you've got me trapped. You think you'll get the glory, bringing me in —"

"I didn't trail you here, Roy. I knew this was where you'd come."

"You — you *knew?*"

"I knew somebody brought you a gift-wrapped package. Knew what it was. I knew you'd want to find out what was on that thing before you turned it over to the cops. You did get a package tonight, didn't you?"

I nodded numbly. I said, "You couldn't know I was coming here. Nobody knew."

"Sure, nobody knew. But maybe I'm smart. My business happens to be investigating people. Figuring out where a guy might go — what he might do — under certain given circumstances."

"But — that thing only came tonight. Only a few hours ago."

"Somebody tipped off McCormick, Roy. Anonymous call from a pay phone. Said you had a sound film from one of the Army or Navy new type dictaphones. Guy said he didn't know what was on it but thought McCormick might be interested."

They'd called the police. Notified them. That was the dodge. Drop it in my lap and then let the cops know I had it. "That was why the cops were coming up to my place after —"

"And you ducked out. We got the reports on it. They called me in because, being in G-2, I know about those recorders. Cops are pretty hot about you giving them the slip."

"The guy who called — he told McCormick that package was just delivered tonight?"

"Hell, no. All he said was you had some sound film. Might be incriminating. I don't know how McCormick figured. But I know you're not dumb. If it was something you were trying to keep from the police you'd destroy it. So the guy was lying. They were planting the thing on you."

It sounded as if he believed in me. As if he wanted to help. But I couldn't be sure. There was something behind the fixed, half-amused expression. His face was like a mask.

"You see, Roy," he was saying, "I had your file out. Quite a file. We've done a lot of checking up. Got a lot of reports. For instance, there's information that when you were recuperating at Halloran, they sent you in town two or three times to work. Right here in this building, in fact."

"You knew about this place?"

"The Army's got a dozen depots like this, scattered in mid-town lofts. We got a lot of G-2 stuff in these places. That's how I knew about the dictaphones being up here. That's what gave me the idea."

"You did some hot guessing, Spike."

"I figured if the sound track was a plant, you'd be desperate to know what was on it. When you ducked out, I knew you weren't skipping town — you could have tried that earlier. You wanted to get hold of one of these ma-

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chines. This was the place you'd try to bust in."

"Why didn't McCormick come along? He'd have enjoyed —"

"I didn't say anything to anybody. I came on over — alone. Had my credentials but the watchman wouldn't let me through until he checked with G-2 on the phone. Said the janitor had made some report about hearing something in the basement but they couldn't find anything."

I said, "It was me they heard. I had to get up here. I didn't —"

"The watchman wanted to come along with me to investigate. I told him to stay where he was. This was a special case I had to handle alone. The elevator man had a passkey. He unlocked the door out there in the hall, let me into the storeroom."

Part of the story sounded like it had to be true. But I didn't know what was in back of it — what was the real idea in coming up this way.

I said, "Let's not play games, Spike. You talk as if you were just dropping in on a pal. But you didn't come up here for nothing. You were closing in, springing the trap."

"I'm not springing any trap. Don't you see I'm trying to help you?"

"Sure. Just like the others. Everybody's my friend. Only maybe I'm a murderer. From those questions you and that man Farr were asking up at Headquarters, maybe I'm even a traitor."

He was perching himself on a pile of those Army cots. "I'm not armed, either. I came in here without any gun. You think I'd be that crazy if I didn't have some belief in you and your story?"

I remembered the gun in my own back pocket. That was one item he didn't know about. Something I should have turned over to him. Only I wasn't going to. Not yet, anyway.

He was lighting a cigarette. He said slowly, "Maybe you did kill him, Roy. I don't know. But I don't think you know either. That's why I'm taking a gamble. Why I'm willing to try to help you find out what did happen."

I wanted to believe him. To believe he was on my side. But this whole thing might be a trick approach. Pretending to be my friend. Getting into my confidence. Hoping I'd reveal facts I'd otherwise keep to myself.

I said, "How do I know whom to trust, Spike? Or what I'm supposed to believe? I feel like I'm alone — like I'm in a jungle — like there isn't anybody —"

He stood up. His dark eyes fixed on mine. Very quietly he said, "I'm trying to help you, Roy. Maybe I'm crazy for trying. But you've got to trust in me. You haven't got any choice."

"What do you mean — no choice?"

"I'm the only one who believes you, Roy. The only one willing to try to help. You couldn't get out of here right now, without me. The watchmen downstairs are on the alert. They'd nab you, turn you over to McCormick. You've got to realize —"

I had that gun in my back pocket. I could fight my way out if I had to. But if I tried that it would be the last play. I'd be on the outside but there wouldn't be any place to go. Nothing to do but wait until they hunted me down.

Spike had it right. There wasn't any choice. I had to trust him. Had to rely

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on his being on my side, the way he said. Maybe it was a gamble. But it was the only gamble I had left.

We bent down beside the dictaphone. The film still had to be attached to that spool at the bottom. While we worked over it, making adjustments, Spike shot questions at me.

I told him about the two visitors — Evie and the old man. I left out any mention of the automatic or how I had it in my hand when the old guy showed up. It was better to let that part ride.

They spotted the old man, Spike said, when he was on the way out. But they didn't try to grab him.

"Arrest him now and he shuts up. They wanted to know where he was heading."

"That begins to make sense. They put a tail on him?"

"Tried it. But he's smart. Knows the way around. He ducks up a couple of alleys, into a few doorways. Then — he just vanishes. Disappears. All of a sudden they don't see him. Sounds nuts. But that's how they phoned in the report."

Spike glanced up. "This film fits exactly. Don't know how anybody got hold of it. But it sure as hell comes from one of these machines."

"Spike, the machine the Navy uses — it's the same thing, isn't it?"

"Sure. All the services have it. It's a sweet job. Almost human. Records the stuff and plays it back. Easy to tote around in the field." Almost as an afterthought he added, "You know, Curtis had one in his hotel room."

Curtis had one in his room. A dictaphone setup. A chill of realization ran through me.

Spike mentioned it so casually, as though it were unimportant. But I knew he was watching me. Watching my reaction to his words.

His hand was at the switch on the side of the machine. "Okay, Roy? You ready?"

I nodded. Maybe the thing had been stolen from Curtis' room. Maybe it would prove I couldn't have killed him.

I watched Spike turn the switch. The record — the sound track — started to run.

It was fuzzy and scratched. Parts of it were hard to make out. But you could hear two voices. One belonged to an older man. It was pompous. You could tell the precise way he had of speaking, in spite of the poor condition of the film.

The other voice sounded like my own.

Voices change when they get recorded. You don't usually recognize yourself. But this time I did. Even though it was hard to get all the words, I knew that voice sounded like mine.

Spike sat on the floor. He took out a pad and pencil and made notes as the record played.

The first part was a jumble of words. You couldn't make sense out of it. Then I heard the voice that sounded like mine:

". . . information is worth money, Captain. I'm out of the service. You couldn't expect me to pass up a good bet."

"You're attempting to hold me up for cash. . . ."

"I'm willing to listen . . ."

"You mean money, don't you . . . ?"

"If you put it that way. Why not? Why shouldn't you? You were part of

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it all, you know, and. . . ."

"You filthy . . ."

"I don't see it that way. It's a business prop. . . ."

There was a break here. The words jumbled again. But you could tell from the sounds that they were talking and the voices were angry. Then:

". . . you understand? I've given long service, Marshall . . . to be ashamed of. For any young fool to come in here . . ."

"You don't give a damn if I tell them . . . you don't think it would matter to Washington if I . . ."

"Not so far. . . ."

"Then I'll do what I see fit. . . ."

"But if you try, young man . . ."

There was a pause on the record. It wasn't just the scratching. It was an actual break in the talk. Then you heard the older voice:

". . . notion what's on your mind."

". . . need money. I've got to have it. There isn't any argument, sir. I've got to . . ."

That was my voice. Yet I'd never talked that way. Never in my life.

"I'm turning this over to the police. I don't care what you may decide. . . ."

"Don't touch that phone."

"You damned idiot. Put down that . . . I said . . ."

The voices broke. You heard the sound of a struggle. It could have been scuffling. It could have been part of the scratching on the film itself. You couldn't be certain.

Then a sudden sharp noise. And what must have been a groan, a choked cry.

And silence. Silence that played out the rest of the sound track.

I listened to it. Listened to the scratching. Murder acted out on a strip of sound film — recorded for posterity.

I looked at Spike. "You think this is straight? You think —"

"You haven't any idea yourself?"

"I don't even remember going there. I don't remember —"

"Sure. We can't tell now. It could be —"

"Spike — if that film was on the machine in the hotel room, why didn't the police find it after he was found dead?"

"There wasn't any film in the recorder when the police got there. None at all."

The recorder had been in the closet in Curtis' room, Spike explained. The only man who knew it was there — besides Curtis — was the gray-haired hotel clerk. He'd been in the hotel for twenty years and actually had the title of assistant manager.

"The guy's name is Jennings," he said. "Randolph Jennings. Curtis always stopped at that hotel when he was in town. He and Jennings got to be friends. Jennings knew about the work Curtis did."

"That was how Jennings knew about the recorder?"

"He helped Curtis set it up. Whether, knowing it was there, he —"

"Could he have gotten to the closet before the police?"

"He did get to the room before the police. He was the first one up there — after somebody called down to the desk about some trouble."

"Who called down?"

"Somebody on the floor below heard scuffling. The hotel desk tried to get Curtis on the phone but there wasn't any answer. Jennings rushed up there. He was only in the room alone for a couple of minutes. Then the others

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rushed in behind him. I don't know if he would have had the time —"

"But somebody got hold of that recording. It was either that or —"

"Or we have to figure it's a fake," Spike snapped.

"It couldn't be faked." I'd heard my own voice on the thing. I knew my own voice.

"You don't know for sure," Spike said. "The fact you think it sounded like you doesn't mean anything. People don't know what their own voices sound like. To me it sounded like it could be you — and it could be somebody trying a phoney."

I was thinking of the fragments of talk in that slice of conversation on the sound track. Apparently I'd had information. Some kind of information I was holding over Curtis.

The murder had happened the day I left the hospital. I hadn't had any information about Curtis that morning when I left. Nothing but the letter I'd received. The only answer was that I had met somebody on the way into town. Or in the city itself. Some person — or persons — who had been waiting for me.

I didn't know if the record were faked or not. Yet I couldn't figure how the sound track — if it were real — got out of that room. Not unless the clerk, Jennings, had taken it out of the room himself.

"It's too neat. That's the trouble. Too damn neat." Spike had taken the sound track out of the machine. He was examining the brown paper it had been wrapped in when the old man delivered it. He swore under his breath, looked up at me.

"You'd make a hot detective," he said. "Didn't you even examine this paper?"

"I looked at it. I didn't —"

It was shiny, heavy, brownish paper. I hadn't paid much attention to it.

"Take a look at this." He held up the paper so it caught the full light.

I still couldn't see what he was talking about. The paper seemed to have a thin, waxy coating. But I couldn't make out anything unusual on it until Spike pointed to one corner.

Then I saw. Faint but clearly visible were figures and writing. But not writing, actually. Indentations. As though someone had been writing on another piece of paper on top of the wrapping paper.

It looked like three figures. The first we couldn't make out. The second looked like four and the third was an eight. There was a word after the figures. It looked like "Finey" or "Finley."

It might have been a surname. But the way it stood there after those figures, I was sure it was a street address.

From his hip pocket Spike drew out a thin, battered red book. It was one of those twenty-five cent, pocket-size directories of city streets.

He began turning pages, running his finger along the alphabetical lists. After a minute he looked up. He said, "There is a Finley Road. It's way uptown. It's in the Bronx. There isn't any other street by that name."

"Maybe that's it," I said. "It's a hell of a slim lead to go on."

"Slim nothing. We've got these two numbers. There's no other street with a name like that. Besides — you notice how waxy this paper is?"

"I notice it's heavy. It's —"

"Know what they use this kind of

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paper for? Wrapping meat. It's the kind you find in butcher shops. If there's a butcher on Finley Road —"

It could have meant nothing at all, of course. It could have been something a man picked up out of a gutter. But it was an address. A special locality. It gave us a starting point.

"Funny the guy didn't realize —"

"You didn't see it," he snapped. "He probably didn't either. Looks like some clerk was writing out a delivery slip on top of this. The address may not have any connection with the case at all. You can't tell, not until —"

"You figure to go up there?"

"I don't know yet." He folded the brown paper and slipped it into his coat pocket.

He found a newspaper on a desk near the door. He used a couple of pieces of it to wrap up the roll of sound film, slipped that in his pocket too. Then he picked up his slouch hat which had been knocked off while we were having that tussle.

There was a wash basin in one corner of the storeroom. We cleaned up there, dried our faces with paper towels.

Through the windows you could see the first gray streaks of dawn outside.

"Spike, we've got to clear out of here."

He was brushing dust from his hat. He said, "I'll handle the watchman, Roy. I'll tell him I'm taking you in for questioning and it's off the record. Matter of security."

"Suppose he checks back with G-2? Suppose they find out —"

"They know I'm on this investigation. I've got to use my own judgment. Particularly about whether or not I'm ready to pull a guy in."

We got ourselves bacon and eggs and coffee in an all-night cafeteria on Eighth Avenue near the corner of 42nd Street.

We didn't talk any about the sound track or what it might mean. But over the coffee, Spike did tell me about the Eaton family. He'd spent hours the previous day delving into their background.

"Nothing unusual about Frank Eaton," he told me. "He's tied up with some bankers' international finance group. Spends all his time poring over dull figures and bond issues, trying to figure how he can make himself an extra million. Poor guy trying to struggle along. The one that puzzles me in that family is Aunt Edna."

He shot me a sideways glance. "She's got a pack of dough herself," he went on. "Most of it's tied up in oil. She owns oil wells. A lot of them out in the Far East."

"There's nothing suspicious about that," I said. "When you've got a pile of dough you have to put it somewhere."

"Oh, sure. But she's a funny dame. Social type. Butterfly, getting along in years. When she was younger she used to travel a great deal. All through Europe. And Asia. Spent one whole winter in Shanghai."

"That doesn't prove anything. Just because a dame with dough lives abroad —"

"You don't get the point. She spent a winter in Shanghai fifteen years ago. Shanghai was where Captain Curtis was stationed most of the time. She moved with the British and American social set. She couldn't have helped knowing him."

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CHAPTER TWELVE

We located the butcher shop finally. It was in a place called Mitchen Square, two blocks from Finley Road, half a mile from the Grand Concourse. It was the only meat market in the neighborhood.

The store was crowded with women shoppers, pushing to get orders taken. Men behind the counters were trying to wait on two or three at a time.

The manager's name was Mr. Morris, a big, heavy-set man with a brown moustache. He kept wiping his hands on the white apron.

He didn't want to talk at first. He kept looking at Spike. Spike finally pulled out some identifications papers. The man studied the papers a couple of minutes and handed them back.

"What do you fellows want?"

Spike told him we were trying to locate an old man who lived somewhere in the neighborhood. Wasn't anything serious. We had a few questions we wanted to ask.

I tried to describe the old man. The whiteness of the face. The lusterless eyes. I got half through my description when the manager stopped me.

"Don't know anybody like that," he said. "Only been in this job a couple of weeks myself. We got a kid named Willie may be able to help you. He makes deliveries."

Willie was just getting ready to start out on his bicycle delivery route. He was a red-haired, gawky youth about sixteen. The manager called him over and explained what we wanted.

He seemed flattered at his own importance. A self-conscious grin came to his lips and he shrugged his shoulders.

"Geez," he said, "it's hard to say. You see a lot of people in my business. Every day — plenty of calls. Some of 'em you get to know pretty well. It ain't easy. Course, there's —"

He looked from Spike to me and back to Spike. "Wait a minute. Wait a minute, now. What did you say he looked like? A little old man with a whitish face? I'll bet —"

He paused. Spike said, "You'll bet what?"

"You mean Lazarus. Lazarus Come Forth. That's what they call him."

Spike gave no show of excitement. "Could be. What's the guy like? Live near here?"

"It's Finley Road, all right," Willie raced on. "Two forty-eight Finley Road. Down at the end there, by the tracks."

"What's his name?" Spike asked.

"Michaels. Lazarus Michaels. The kids call him Lazarus Come Forth because that's what he don't do. Only once or twice a month he comes out to get supplies. I've delivered stuff there sometimes. Mostly he stays in the house. Lives alone."

"You can show us the house?" I asked.

"Sure. Nothing to it. You friends?"

I said we'd never met him. Willie shook his head. "Wouldn't count on any big reception. They say he don't take to visitors. Especially people he don't know."

Nobody really knew much about Michaels, Willie explained. There were stories he was once a Broadway actor

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until he had a broken romance and took to heavy drinking. There was another yarn that he was a disinherited brother of some English lord.

"But he's lived in that rat hole a long time," Willie said. "No one knows where he gets his dough from, even the little he spends for food. But nobody bothers him and he don't bother nobody.

"Funny thing, though. Seems like a few months back he got himself a car. Keeps it in a garage in the back. There's been a couple of stories that he goes riding in it sometimes at night. But then you know how people talk."

It sounded screwy enough to fit the old man. And the address matched the marks we'd found on the wrapping paper. I noticed packages people were carrying appeared to be wrapped in the same kind of paper.

"Sometimes," Willie was telling us, "you can hear him playing on that piano he's got. That's only daytimes. Nights he goes to bed early. There's never any lights on in the place."

"City type hermit, sounds like," I said.

Willie laughed. "You got it right. I'll take you down there. Place isn't far. But I'm warning you — he don't like visitors."

Spike said, "That'll be too damn bad."

It was an old house. A two-story, weather-beaten frame dwelling. It sat on a corner lot that faced a coal yard. Beyond the coal yard were railroad sidings and freight cars.

Shades were drawn at most of the windows. The day was hazy and the window panes glittered in the half light.

The front yard was cluttered with refuse, tin cans and old papers. But the place had an air of respectability, in spite of the dilapidated condition. The front porch was clean. Three high-backed wicker chairs were lined up in a row like guards at attention.

We hunted for a bell or knocker by the front door but found none. We could see the door wasn't closed tight. Spike knocked several times without getting any answer. Then he pounded with his fist. There was no sound from inside. Finally Spike said, "The hell with it."

He pushed the door open.

Inside was a pungent, dusty smell. In the entrance hall was an old-fashioned clothes rack with a mirror and umbrella stand. Across from that were double sliding doors facing on the living room.

The living room was crowded with a hodgepodge collection of furniture. It looked like a junk shop. There was a horse-hair sofa in one corner. The wall paper was a floral design, faded and in places torn. On the wall were three or four darkened paintings in gilt frames.

There was a man in a rocking chair near the window, his back to the double doors. I cleared my throat. The man jumped at the sound. He whirled and faced us.

It was the old fellow. The one who had brought me that package.

You could see surprise and anger in his face. "What — what is the meaning of this invasion?" he demanded. "What are you doing breaking into my home? This is a private home."

"Yes, of course." Spike smiled. "We're sorry to intrude."

Spike glanced over at me. I nodded confirmation. He turned back to the

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old man. "You're Mr. Lazarus Michaels?"

He looked at us with bewilderment, trying desperately to understand what was happening.

"I — I must explain. I never see anyone. Never see anyone. I cannot understand why you should break in here in this manner. I'm alone here."

"We pounded on the door," I said. "You didn't answer."

"I had no wish to see anyone." He was staring straight at me. "I have never seen you before. I do not know who or what you are. I must ask you to leave. Please get out of my house."

I said, "Mr. Michaels, you dropped in on me last night. We're returning the call. We'd like a little more explicit information."

"I called on you?" He was shaking his head. "I never saw you before. I haven't been out of this house in a week. I haven't called on anybody."

"You're lying," I said. "You damn well know you were down there."

It wasn't any good. Michaels kept staring at me blankly, muttering that he didn't know who I was, hadn't ever seen me before.

We threw questions at him. We asked him about the package, the film he'd brought down. Where had he gotten it? Who had given it to him?

I could see drops of perspiration on his face. My pity for him was mixed up with my realization that he was tied in with the people I was trying to hunt down.

"I don't know what you're talking about," he said. "I want to be left by myself. Why don't you go, please?"

He looked up at us with a pleading, childish expression. It had to be acting. It couldn't be real. Yet he seemed utterly sincere in that lost, puzzled, helpless manner.

"I never saw you before, either of you," he told us. "I know nothing about any package. I never go out, except to a few stores nearby for my provisions. I go nowhere else. They'll all tell you that. Ask the people who live around here. They all know."

He had the perfect alibi. The whole neighborhood to stand behind his story that he never left the house.

Spike kept at him. Kept asking questions but it wasn't any use. He didn't even seem to hear. He walked across the room and began straightening a vase of artificial flowers.

I looked around at the room. There was a mantelpiece crowded with little curios, ash trays and goblets, an alarm clock and a set of copper candlesticks. There were ashes in the fireplace and a few embers of coal still glowing red.

Michaels seemed oblivious to our presence. He continued to adjust those artificial flowers. He was humming to himself.

I said, "You shouldn't be treating us this way. After all, I am a friend of Evie's."

It was a blind thrust. We'd asked him about Evie once or twice, but he'd only shaken his head numbly. But now the meaning seemed to strike home.

I knew Evie. I was Evie's friend.

His eyes seemed to burn into mine. "You say — you say you know me?"

"Sure, I know you," I told him easily. "Don't you remember now?"

He hesitated. "Perhaps I could be mistaken. Perhaps —"

"You remember last night?"

He shook his head. "Oh, no. It wasn't

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last night. It wasn't last night at all. It was a while ago, when —"

"A while ago — when what?"

"When I saw you. When she told me about you. When she told me — but I do remember now. I do remember it quite distinctly."

"You remember what?"

"She told me about it. She told me."

"Evie told you? What —"

"Yes, I do remember it all. I do. I —"

His voice faded. Horror came into his face. It was sudden and sharp and unmistakable. He took a step backwards. He seemed almost to be cringing before me.

"I remember. I know who you are now. I know who you are."

The watery eyes were wide, demented. Stark terror rode in the glittery stare. For him I was polluted and untouchable.

"Get out of here," he cried. "Get out of this house, I tell you. You're to be Queen of the May. Yes, that's what you are. You're to be Queen of the May."

You're to be Queen of the May. A ripple of fear went through me at the irrational, meaningless words. I'd heard them before. I knew I'd heard them somewhere — somehow. They hung on the edges of my memory.

"What does that mean?" I persisted. "What do you mean by that gag — Queen of the May?"

He laughed. "Ask your lady. Ask your Carol. I remember that, you see. I recall quite well. You ask her."

He sat down in the rocker and hid his face in his hands. You could hear the short, gasping sobs of hysteria.

Spike said, "It's no use now. He's demented. There's only one thing we can do — have to do. We've got to —"

He left it unfinished. But I knew what he was thinking. Michaels was out of his mind. We had to get word to the proper authorities. Maybe, under treatment, they could make him talk sense.

There wasn't any phone in the house. But there would be one up at that market.

Spike started for the door and I followed. The old man didn't even bother to look up.

We were outside, crossing the front yard to the sidewalk, when we heard the tinkling sound from inside the house.

It was a piano. A piano very much off key. The notes had a sickly vibration. It wasn't a tune, nothing you could recognize. It was a jangle of noises.

We stopped to listen. Spike said, "He recovered quick enough from that hysteria."

"Unless it's somebody else in the house," I said.

"Let's go back," Spike cut in. "You may be right. I've got a hunch there is somebody else in there. That noise isn't coming from the living room. There wasn't any piano in the living room."

We went back up the steps to the porch, shoved open the door and walked in. The sound of the piano was louder. I looked into the living room. The old man wasn't there.

The sounds appeared to come from a room at the end of a short hall leading to the rear of the house. The hall was shadowy and we had to grope our way along.

The door was closed. We stood a moment listening. The tuneless tinkle of that piano kept on. But now we

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could hear someone talking. It sounded like Michaels.

"They've gone now," he was saying. "They've gone away. You can sing all you want. They can't hear you. They've gone."

Spike put his hand on the doorknob, turned it, opened the door.

The old man was seated at an upright piano in what looked like a small music room. Beside the piano was a large, overstuffed chair.

Evie was sitting in the chair. She was wearing that purple, flower-design dress. Her legs were crossed and her skirt rode up above her knees.

The old man didn't hear us come in. He was bent over those yellowed piano keys. "Go on and sing, Evie," he was saying. "Go on and sing."

She had her head tilted a little to one side. The blond hair fell to her shoulders.

I said, "Evie, what the hell—"

She didn't move. She seemed to look at us with an empty gaze. It took a moment to seep in. The girl in the chair was dead.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

We spent the rest of that afternoon at Headquarters.

They made me tell and retell the story of how we found Evie. Everything I knew about her. All about how we found that house. The one break I had this time was that I had Spike to back me up.

Then, when we'd spread out most of the facts, Spike went behind closed doors with McCormick. They kept me under guard in a room on a lower floor.

I was there an hour. The detectives guarding me wouldn't talk. They wouldn't even answer my questions. They sat stony faced, smoking cigarettes and staring at the floor.

Spike came down finally. McCormick was with him. They and the detectives guarding me had a conference outside the door while I sat alone in the room.

In about five minutes Spike came into the room. The thin lips bent in a tight smile. "It's all right for now. They're not going to hold you. You're in my custody. I'm responsible if anything goes wrong."

McCormick and the two detectives had gone. Apparently McCormick didn't want to talk to me direct. He hadn't been present when I'd been interrogated.

Spike gave me the story when we were outside, starting up to my room on Second Avenue.

"I didn't tell him about the recording," Spike said. "Nothing about the loft building or the dictaphone."

We'd agreed to that beforehand. I hadn't mentioned it either in the talks with the detectives. Meantime, our story was that the crazy guy had been carrying some kind of package and some loose papers when he dropped in on me. I was vague about it. I hadn't noticed exactly what they were. He just happened to leave one of the papers behind.

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Even if the old man started talking about the recording, we could always say it was part of his lunatic ramblings. And if the cops said they hadn't noticed him carrying any papers when they tried to follow him afterwards the supposition could be he must have shoved them into his pocket.

Spike was smart. He was holding the thing until he was ready. I'd been right in trusting him. He was on my side.

"If McCormick's so certain about my being guilty," I asked him, "why is he waiting? Why doesn't he go ahead and get the indictment now?"

"You're out in my custody, Roy, still on a string — because he wants the rest of the gang and you're the bait. He says he doesn't know whether you'll be bumped off or not. Doesn't care. Not as long as you suck in the others."

There were things he wasn't saying. I was pretty sure he'd been my advocate up there with McCormick. Stood behind me. Told McCormick he thought there was a good chance I wasn't guilty.

I couldn't know for sure. They must have clashed on that point. But apparently Spike didn't want to talk about that part so I let it go.

"McCormick's convinced they'll try to get you next," he told me. "He's probably right about that. You've got to be smart. You've got to play the angles. Remember, they made an attempt at it once before."

Back in the room on Second Avenue, I tried to thank him. I said I knew he'd put his trust in my being innocent, had gone out on a limb with McCormick.

"You're the only friend I've got in this damn mess. I want to put all the facts on the table."

"All the facts? Is there —"

"Something I've got to tell you about that I didn't. I guess I didn't know what to do, what it meant."

I told him about the automatic. How I'd gotten it. About the baggage check Carol turned over to me and how I went over and got the shoe box at Grand Central.

His expression tightened as he listened. When I finished he didn't speak for a couple of minutes. He stood motionless, staring at me.

At last he said, "You should have told me, Roy. You should have told me."

I said, "I know I should have. I know it now. But I didn't then. I didn't know this morning in that building, when —"

"Let me see it. Where is it?"

I got the shoe box out of the bureau drawer, opened it, took out the automatic and the clip. I'd put them back when I'd returned that morning. For a long time he looked at them.

"One bullet missing from the clip." The slanting eyes bore into mine. "You know for certain if this is your gun or not?"

I couldn't be positive. "Can't remember what the serial number was on mine. Can't seem to find any serial number on this one. It looks like it's had about the same amount of wear as mine. I think it's the same one. I can't say for certain."

He turned the automatic over in his hand. "It could send you to the chair."

He said the words coldly, deliberately. He walked to the window, looked out at the darkness of the backyards behind Second Avenue.

"You wouldn't give it to me if you did know. You could have gotten rid of

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it — just as you could have gotten rid of that recording."

He wasn't talking to me. It was debate with himself. A struggle within himself. The evidence forcing him to believe in my guilt, even against his will.

"You've stuck your neck out enough, Spike. You do — whatever you ought to. I was glad for the chance when McCormick let me out. I thought I could somehow prove I wasn't in it. Instead —"

Spike said, "Sure, you were in it. But if you knew how or why would you be giving me this gun? You could have dropped the damn thing in the river."

"Of course, I don't know how or why," I said. "But I don't feel about it the way I did at first. Then it didn't seem possible. Now I'm sure the man who called himself Johnny Wilson — I'm beginning to believe he may be the one —"

"Carol gave you that baggage check," he broke in. "She had the check. She knew it was yours. Why didn't she turn it over to McCormick? She knew you were mixed up in a murder. Why didn't she tell him?"

"All I can figure is she didn't realize it could be important. An ordinary baggage room check."

Spike went to the bureau, put the automatic back in the shoe box.

"She should have known," he said. "Of course, she should have known. It's just one more piece of evidence dropped in your lap."

He had the box tied up. "I'm taking this thing with me, Roy. In fact, I'm stowing it away beside that recording. We're still playing it our own way. We're not telling anybody yet."

He was at the door. "But there's one thing I'm asking you — don't leave this room. There's coppers watching downstairs. I'm giving them orders — for the time being — you're not to leave. I've got a lot of work on this job. I've got —"

"Don't worry. I won't be trying to go anywhere. Thanks for —"

He made an attempt at a grin. "See you tomorrow."

He closed the door. I was alone in the place. A prisoner in that room.

They had Michaels under police guard at Bellevue Hospital.

That night they gave him a new drug supposed to make him talk but it didn't work. After their examination, the doctors stated the man was a heroin addict. They said his mind appeared to have broken under long-continued strain and his use of narcotics.

In the night he grew violent, letting out high screeching cries of pain. Even after heavy sedatives, he lay groaning in his sleep.

The police hadn't been able to get any information out of him. To the questions they asked, he made no answer, looking at them numbly, the way he had with us, shaking his head from side to side.

Spike told me about it that next morning. I could tell from his manner he was in higher spirits than he had been the previous night.

"You're in the clear on Evie's death, anyway," he informed me. "They did a post-mortem on the body over at the morgue. She died of morphine poisoning, injected in the arm. The autopsy showed she's been using drugs regularly."

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"Do you think Michaels —"

"They don't know. She'd been dead about two hours when we found her. She'd had three injections of pure morphine. That last one finished her. They figure at least the last two injections must have been given to her sometime during the forenoon. But you were here then — the cops know that. So you couldn't have been —"

"Could she have done it herself?"

"There was a hypodermic needle in her purse. Washed clean. No fingerprints either. Cops searched Michaels' house but didn't find any more needles and no narcotics. The guy did used to be a Broadway actor, about forty years back. They found a lot of old clippings."

"But nothing helpful? No clue —"

"Not a thing. And they can't find any neighbors who'll say they saw her come in. With her dead, this case is wide open. Some of the detectives wanted to pull you in again last night for more questioning. McCormick put the kibosh on it. He still figures you as the bait."

I was the sitting duck. He didn't care if they used me for target practice. He had me tagged as guilty in his own mind. What happened to me didn't matter. Not if it helped him round up whoever else was involved in the two deaths.

"That gibberish the old guy was telling us," Spike said. "That stuff about the Queen of the May. I can't even start to figure that one. What in hell do you suppose —"

"Spike, I don't know what it means. But there's something to it. Something I remembered last night, after I got into bed. I lay there trying to think —"

I showed him the slip of paper I'd found in the room the first night. The slip of paper in my own handwriting:

"This isn't — sure it is, yes, it is. I'll be Queen of the May — of June, July, August — anyway, Evie knows but she's afraid. . . ."

He read it over with a frown. He pushed the gray hat back on his head. "Doesn't make sense. Unless you were drunk when you wrote it. Maybe that was it. Maybe you heard her make some remark and tried to get her to tell you about it."

"I think that's what happened, Spike. It must have been some term they used. It had meaning to them. I must have heard her use it."

"The old guy told us to ask Carol, didn't he?" Spike scowled. "He knew who Carol was. Maybe Carol knew him too. Strikes me she's one little lady we ought to do some talking to. Seems to me she may have some answers."

It was possible. But I couldn't believe Carol was tied up with any gang dealing in narcotics. "Sure we can talk to her," I said. "That probably would be the smart thing. But she can't actually be involved."

"Thought you didn't know her. Didn't even remember her."

"I don't. You can tell what people are like. Tell just by talking with them. She just got herself involved in something she doesn't know anything about. McCormick told me that. Said she was just a romantic kid got taken for a ride. I was the guy who took her."

"You sound like you've gone overboard."

"I've only seen her once — that I remember, I mean. She — the only one she cares about, or cared about, rather — doesn't exist. A guy named Johnny Wilson."

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Spike had some idea in the back of his mind.

"Everybody working on this case," he said, "seems to run into dead ends. You start on one road and it goes a way and then stops cold. Maybe the real road's so obvious we can't see it."

"How do you mean that?"

"Whoever is behind it — whoever runs the machine — is somebody you just wouldn't think about. Somebody even McCormick would okay. Somebody —"

"Stop talking in riddles. If you've got any idea —"

"It's going to be your show, Roy. All yours. You're doing the detecting. But I'm the one giving you the instructions. I'm telling you the questions."

"What questions? I'm no detective. Everything I've touched since I — since —"

Spike wasn't listening. "McCormick's the one to make arrangements. He'll go for it too. Even though he'd tagged you as guilty, this might be a lead to the others. He can have guys listening in. Don't think you'll be alone any of the time. You won't. There'll be people keeping track of every move you make."

He was excited. "Don't worry about dough. I'll let you have a couple of fivers. I can put it on expenses."

I said, "What the hell is the expedition?"

"Better get yourself slicked up," he advised me. "You're having a date. Time out for a chat. With your girl friend Carol."

They were waiting for me at cocktail time, in the lounge bar at the Hotel Plaza on 59th Street, Carol in a gray suit and a floppy gray hat, Edna very chic in a red dress and an eccentric hat and a high feather.

It was quiet in the lounge. The lighting was subdued. They were seated at a table off in a corner. Carol saw me and waved a hand.

She was lovely. Whatever else might be true about her, you couldn't deny that.

She held out her hand as I reached the table. She made a half-hearted effort at a smile. Edna regarded me coldly, giving a curt, perfunctory nod.

Carol said, "Sit down, Johnny. I mean —"

"It's all right. Call me Johnny. It's probably easier."

Call me Johnny. Sure. That was the name when you married me, wasn't it? And it's to find out just how much you knew about Johnny that I'm here now.

A man and a girl. And a maiden aunt. Perfectly normal meeting, on the surface. Only this wasn't exactly normal. This one was staged by the cops.

I sat across from them. They were drinking old-fashioneds. The waiter came and I ordered a Martini.

Edna seemed the most composed. She was smoking a cigarette through an ornate holder. She regarded me with a quizzical expression.

She said, "One wouldn't ever have dreamed these things could happen. When Carol first met you at that dance. When she came back and told me about you. The dance was at that hall over on Park and Sixty-third —"

It was so obvious, I almost laughed. I said, "Was that where it was, really? You know I don't recall."

"It wasn't Sixty-third Street," Carol commented quietly. "It was the Commodore."

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Edna seemed put out. She frowned at Carol. She said to me, "You don't really remember?"

"Do I have to keep on saying it? I don't know anything about those weeks. It would be rather foolish to—"

"Where's your real home?" Edna asked. There was a shift in her tone. She seemed to want to know, to find out what and who I was.

"It's out in Ohio. It's on a farm."

The waiter brought the Martini and I sipped it.

It's strange when you start to talk about yourself. About your home. People and the places you've known since you were a kid.

Edna kept up her questions. They were smart. Questions to trip me if I were lying. She'd throw them in with that off-hand, fluffy air. *But my dear boy—you told Carol you lived on a ranch. Didn't you say you live on a ranch? You said it was Montana or some place, wasn't it? Now really—*

Carol said little. She seemed to watch me most intently when I talked about my home town. About the drug store and the high school and places where we used to go on camping trips.

Maybe it was the Martini. I got to talking about that countryside, the woods themselves.

"There's something honest in that world. It isn't fake. New York is a great city. It's on the pulse of things. But I like getting out of it, getting out of any city."

Carol smiled. A musing smile. She was holding both her hands on her glass, looking down into it as if it were a kind of crystal ball.

"But none of this—none of it is what we really came here for, is it?" she asked me, still smiling.

"No. You're right. We're not supposed to be talking about anything like that. We're supposed to be playing some fool game."

She laughed a little. "It's too obvious. I mean for all of us. You're not going to walk into any traps, Johnny, even if we were smart enough to set them properly."

She had a disarming air. "We might as well be frank about it. I know—you're trying to play your little game, too."

"Sure," I agreed. "I'm trying to fight my way through. Trying to get the truth of it. That's why—"

"That's why Lieutenant McCormick arranged this meeting. So we could see what we could learn about you. And so that you—you could find out about us. We're supposed to be mixed up with gangsters and criminals."

Edna, for all her sophistication, appeared shocked. "Don't tell me you were trying to pry into our affairs? After all that's happened."

Carol had guessed it right. She'd realized what was happening. She said, "They're still investigating, Aunt Edna. This was sort of a trick."

I couldn't figure where they were heading. I couldn't be certain Carol wasn't being a lot smarter than she seemed, whether that air of girlish honesty wasn't put on.

"Of course, there isn't any point in playing games," Edna said. "Not really. If people would just be sincere with each other."

I said, "All right. Then would you mind answering a couple of questions for me?"

"Questions? Young man, I'm an out-

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sider. I know nothing about —"

"I'd like to know about your travels."

"Oh, Aunt Edna's traveled everywhere," Carol interrupted quickly. "She's been all over the world and home again."

"I'd like to know about a special trip. When you were out in the Orient. In Shanghai, to be precise."

"Shanghai?" Edna echoed. "Yes. I remember well. It was years ago. Twelve or fourteen years. Maybe longer. I can't be sure now. I really can't."

"You knew a lot of people out there?"

"I went with the American crowd, mostly. And Britishers. Alone, of course. Most of the time I traveled alone. But I knew people wherever I went."

"You know any of our officials? In the Orient, that is?"

"What you're really asking is, did I know Captain Curtis? Why not say what you mean, young man? Because I did know him. He was in Shanghai some of that time. Everyone knew him, naturally. I assure you it was quite casual. Between us were only casual, social pleasantries."

Carol's lips curved. "You don't really think, Johnny —"

"How do I know what to think about this thing?" I asked her. "I'm trying to reach out, trying to learn."

Edna, looking at me, said, "He really does want to learn, doesn't he?"

That fluffy air had vanished from her manner. The gray eyes that looked at me had a curious intensity.

Beneath that air I believed she was sincere. It wasn't all society and glamour. Those questions she'd asked earlier about my home, about me — she'd wanted the answers, wanted to find out what I was like.

Carol had a cigarette in her hand. I struck the match for her. Accidentally, my hand brushed against hers.

The touch was electric. Sitting close to her — looking at her — had its effect on me. I couldn't deny it or run from it. I couldn't be sure whether she realized it or not.

I couldn't be sure either what she was really like. All of it could be a performance. But I knew the game Spike had dreamed up wouldn't work. If either Carol or Edna knew more than they pretended, there wasn't any way I could trick them into the truth.

Looking at Carol, it didn't seem to matter. I could understand how Johnny Wilson fell in love with her.

There was still the one link between her and that other world. One contact with Michaels, with Evie. It was that insane phrase he had used. And his telling us to ask Carol, that she would know.

I told her about the note I'd found in the room and that line about the Queen of the May. I told her about our going up to see Michaels and his standing in the center of the room, tossing those irrational words at us.

"We can't figure it," I said. "Michaels told us you would know. He told us —"

"He said I'd know? But how?"

"Did you ever see him — talk with him?"

"No. I didn't. But I know that phrase, Johnny. I — I heard it before. It was from Evie. She told me. Told me that time she called me up, when she was trying to find you. When she said you were in some sort of dan-

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"But how did she tell you? What did she say?"

"It — it didn't sound terribly important, Johnny. I mean the phrase didn't. She just used it."

"It was some kind of code?"

"I don't think so. Though, maybe it was — in a way. She used it sort of offhand. I gathered it was her own expression. Her way of describing anybody who — anybody who was important."

"How do you mean — important? I wasn't —"

"Not important, exactly. She said the others — some others — were frightened of you. They were going to hurt you. She wanted to warn you."

Carol seemed to be searching for words. I said, "Try to remember exactly what she told you, Carol. You've got to remember."

"She said to tell you you were right about the Queen of the May. I said that sounded crazy and she said you'd understand. That was a phrase she used. That it meant they were gunning for you. That's what she told me."

Just a phrase she used. Probably the whole crowd used that phrase. A deadly little joke.

"That night at the bar — did you tell me about her using that expression?"

"Yes, of course. The words themselves — crazy as they sounded — weren't the important thing. You were in danger, Johnny. They were trying to kill you. Whatever I thought about you I had to warn you."

Somehow Michaels had found out about that phone call Evie had made to Carol. He told the others. They realized Evie wasn't playing their game. She'd fallen for me.

That was why Evie had wanted to run away — to get away from them.

I asked Carol about the baggage check. Why hadn't she turned it over to McCormick when he came to talk with her after my arrest?.

She seemed puzzled. She hadn't actually known the check was there. Those few shirts and things had been in a bureau drawer. She hadn't even thought of them until the afternoon I showed up. The baggage stub had just been lying there under the shirts. She hadn't thought it was important.

"Was it anything special, Johnny?"

"Just more personal belongings. I wondered."

I didn't want to think she was lying. I didn't want to believe she was part of the business. I wanted to believe she was what she seemed.

Carol said, "Death — threats — all this. Aunt Edna's right. You never would have dreamed —"

"It's what comes from not knowing about people," Edna said. "You recall, Carol, I said you ought to know more about him and —"

"There must have been some pleasant moments," I told Carol. "Some of it —"

"Some of it was rather nice, Johnny. Evenings we had together. There was the night walking through the park — it was frosty then."

Frost. The chill of autumn. Walking arm in arm. "It sounds like a good deal," I said. "I wish —"

I stopped. I wished I could remember those things. I wished they were actually a part of my life. I said, "It's stupid — being jealous of yourself."

The curved eyebrows lifted. "Jealous of yourself?"

"I suppose, of Johnny Wilson. I

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envy him. Because he had —"

"You're being perfectly stupid." Aunt Edna lost her poise for an instant. "Wilson was something you dreamed up. He was an impersonation."

They still clung to the idea I had played that role, that it hadn't been real. But in her tone, and the way Carol looked at me, I knew they weren't sure.

There was music. A string orchestra off somewhere playing an old-fashioned waltz. Edna was studying her face in the mirror of her compact. Carol leaned back in her chair. She was lost in her own thoughts. Yet she knew I was watching her.

Carol said, "And that girl Evie? Have you seen her again?"

She didn't know. I hadn't told her. The story hadn't been in the papers; McCormick had held it up. I'd told her about seeing Michaels, but I hadn't mentioned our going back into that house the second time.

I said, "Carol, Evie's dead."

She looked at me blankly. I poured out the story, as much as I could tell her. Edna set down her compact and her hands trembled so she spilled powder on the table.

Carol listened. She didn't speak. I told her about the post-mortem. "It was morphine poisoning," I said. "She didn't suffer. She went to sleep. Then — after that last injection — she —"

I tried to make my voice calm, objective, as I told the facts.

"Evie!" Carol said. "She was the one who tried to help you. She sent you that warning, through me. She didn't care what happened to her. It was only —"

She stopped. The red lips trembled. Her eyes held accusation. Her hands were at her cheeks. She turned her head so I couldn't see her face.

She was weeping. I could hear choked sobbing above the melody of that string ensemble.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

THE game hadn't worked.

I told Spike about it that night, over dinner in a Second Avenue lunchroom.

"She was telling the truth," I said. "I don't know how I know but I do. She can't be lying. And she's too smart, Spike, to fall into any booby trap."

"Too smart is right. I figured she'd be wise."

He made me give him the full picture of the interview. Once or twice he stopped me to ask about Carol's or Edna's reaction at some special moment.

"They were wise," he said when I finished. "Wise from the start. Even at that you got a few juicy items from them."

"In what they said?"

"Sure. For one — we got the answer to that Queen of the May rumpus."

From the facts I got from Carol, with what we knew, he pieced it together. "You heard Evie use that phrase, maybe over the phone, talking to somebody else. Or maybe accidentally she used it in a conversation with you. You forced her to tell you what it meant.

"She learns later you're in danger.

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She can't locate you. She calls Carol, tells her to warn you. But Evie knows she's talked too much. When you come back, she tries to get you to leave town with her."

"Only I won't go."

"Right. Next day they try that ambush. You get wounded. The shock of it shakes your mind back. She can't turn to you any more. But she's still scared. She wants to get out of it. She needs money, help. So she turns to Michaels. He's in a spot too. A dopester — slave to a drug, to the people who can give him the drug."

"Which is how Michaels knew Evie went to Carol. Evie told him the whole story."

"Only Michaels didn't keep it to himself. He went to the others. They realized the blonde was yapping. They couldn't trust her. She knew too much and she was falling for you."

That was why Evie died. She'd been to see me several times, even after I'd recovered my memory. They didn't know how much she talked. They couldn't afford to take chances.

I said, "It doesn't go anywhere. It's another one of those dead ends you were talking about. We're still groping, fumbling."

"Don't overlook Edna."

"She's not in it. You couldn't find anything."

"But she did know Curtis. She knew him. Doesn't that strike you as rather extraordinary?"

"Could be. The way she explained it, that doesn't mean anything. They just happened to be in Shanghai at the same time. They moved in the same set. She said it was just casual."

"Maybe, Roy. I think she's lying. I think we've got to start digging to find out just what Edna was doing in Shanghai. Just whom she did and didn't know. And why."

"I suppose," I said, "we're taking the next plane out of here — for China?"

He laughed. "There's a guy in town Aunt Edna may have forgotten. Richard Farr. He worked for Curtis in China. Knows a lot about what went on in those days. He may be able to throw some interesting light on the Eatons."

I went to see Farr myself.

Farr hated me. Hated me because he was certain I'd killed his friend. Hated me with blind rage.

Yet he was the one man I could turn to with this problem. He would know about Edna. He would know about the past, that blank part of the record, the prewar years in Asia.

He was staying at a hotel on Twenty-fourth Street, off Fifth Avenue. I went down there in a bus. All the way down on the bus I kept trying to map out what I would say.

Questions kept coming into my thoughts. If he had known about her in Shanghai, why hadn't he recognized the name here? Or had he recognized the name?

I wasn't even sure he'd see me. When I got to the hotel, I sent up my name, told them to say it was urgent. The clerk informed me I could go up.

He was alone in the hotel room.

He stood up when I came in. He was wearing a blue dressing robe. The color seemed to make the yellowish tinge in his skin stand out. His face was as hard and bitter as when I had seen him last.

"What do you want, Marshall?"

It was more than a question. State

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your business and leave. We don't wish to soil our hands more than we have to.

"I came to ask your help."

"You want *me* to help you?"

"You're the only one who can at this moment."

He made a grunting sound of disgust. "There's nothing I can do for you. Nothing I can or would."

"You can hear me out, can't you? You can find out what I've got to say?"

"Hear you out?" His lips twisted. "So that's what I'm supposed to do. Listen to the whimperings of—"

"I'm not trying to whimper. You don't have to do anything. You just—"

His shoulders sagged. There was a resignation in the way his hands hung at his sides.

"I suppose—I must." Some of the harshness was gone. "Sit down. That chair by the bed. Go on—go on and talk. I doubt if there is a thing I can do for you. But we—we give the devil his hour."

I didn't know exactly where to begin. I wanted to get the whole picture over to him.

I said, "There are others in it, Mr. Farr. Even if you're right about me, don't you realize there must be others in it?"

"Others? Yes. I think there's a gang of you at work here in the States."

"That's what I want to talk about. You know about Evie's death? About the old man?"

"I have been kept informed of developments."

"I'm—I'm somehow tied up with them, Mr. Farr. I admit that. But you see—I don't know how."

It caught his interest. I saw a flicker of light in his eyes. It was seeping into his thoughts, the chance that the gang had actually roped me in during those blank weeks.

He said, so quietly I could hardly hear, "Get on with it!"

"The day Curtis was killed—it was the same day I was released from the hospital. It's perfectly clear I went to see Captain Curtis that day."

"That fact is well established."

"My memory went on that same day. I don't know what was the cause. I took on a new identity. I had money in my pocket, money I'd gotten when I was discharged. I took a room. I—what I was doing—or planning to do—I don't know."

"Possibly"—his voice was tinged with sarcasm—"you merely existed from day to day. Doing nothing at all."

"Possibly that's right. I did go to one USO dance. I met a girl named Carol Eaton. We had a whirlwind romance. We eloped. Later—after we got back—this other group found me. They sent that girl Evie after me. Carol and I were apparently fighting all the time. Evie faked a pickup. She went on parties with me. Drinking bouts. She didn't have much trouble, I guess, dragging me out of Carol's world."

Farr said, "But all of this is only guessing. You don't come to grips with facts."

"It's leading to what I want to say. That crowd was trying to destroy me. That much is pretty clear. Somebody—some group—is afraid of what I know or what they think I know."

Farr leaned forward in the chair. His large hands clasped together. "You may have something there. If you were telling the truth, you might—"

"I'm telling the truth. That's why I'm

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here. I told you I wanted your help. Not to get me out of anything. Just to — add up the facts."

"I could be wrong," he told me. "I could be wrong, Marshall. It isn't a possibility I entirely overlook."

"They tried to ambush me," I said. "I believe the reason they haven't tried since is they're certain I'll be formally charged with his murder."

"Your story then is that this thing is a frameup?"

"I've been delving into it. Looking at it from every angle. Trying to dig out the facts."

"I know," he said. "I know also about Lieutenant Yamada's work on the case. He feels you're at least morally innocent."

"But there's something I don't think you know. Yesterday I had cocktails with Carol Eaton. Also her aunt, Miss Edna Eaton."

"Is that of special significance?"

"I wonder if you knew Edna Eaton?"

"I haven't met either of them. I've heard, from Lieutenant McCormick, of the family, of your relationship with Carol."

"I didn't mean that. I wondered if you had heard of Edna Eaton out in the Orient. She was out there too."

He laughed. "I suppose she was one of the tourists, back before the war?"

"She spent one winter in Shanghai."

"So have thousands of other Americans, men and women. There was a constant flow of people in the old days. Ships coming in with new arrivals — leaving with old friends. You couldn't know everyone. Even in my job."

"Captain Curtis never spoke of her to you?"

"Why do you think he should have?"

"She said she knew him. Not well, she told me. But she did know him during that winter. She mingled in the same set, the British and American social crowd."

"There were many social crowds, as you put it, in Shanghai. I was in the city occasionally, usually only to make reports to Curtis when he made headquarters there. Why do you think she would be important? The mere fact that she was there hardly seems sufficient to warrant any real interest."

"Doesn't it strike you as — curious?"

He had a half-smile. "You think she had a romance with Captain Curtis? A secret romance? That perhaps he threw her over?"

"Maybe not that melodramatic. I don't know. I wondered, had you ever heard of her out there? If there was some way to check up, to see if she did know Curtis only casually."

He seemed amused. "Poor Curtis! The confirmed bachelor. Devoted all his life to his work. If he knew his name were being linked with Edna somebody who spent a winter in Shanghai, he'd throw a fit in his grave. I'm not saying he didn't know her. I didn't mingle in the social world. My job wouldn't allow that."

"Yes. They told me. You were an undercover operative, you might call it."

"You might not call it. I lived in China. I was part of that life. I could mingle in their world unobtrusively. That was my value to Curtis. That was why he asked me to work for him. Because I could touch parts of the Chinese world — of Asia — most white men couldn't reach."

I hesitated. "If you stayed in the

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background, then he might have —"

"No!" He boomed it out. "I'd have heard. Captain Curtis was known in too many circles in the East. It would have been impossible for him to have a secret romance. Not out there. Not in those days."

"So you rule Edna out entirely?"

"I'm sorry," he informed me. "I wish — to tell you the truth, I had rather hoped — you would have real information."

The phone rang. The jangling broke into his words. He walked over and picked up the receiver.

"Yes . . . oh . . . yes. . . ."

It sounded like a man's voice at the other end. But it wasn't loud enough for me to hear.

"Quite right," Farr was saying. "Yes . . . I will do that, of course. . . . No, don't concern yourself. . . . Take all the time you need. . . ."

He hung up. He was smiling as he faced me again. "I was saying," he went on, "that I really hoped you had something important. Something that might prove I'd been wrong. But your idea about this woman —"

I said, "Sorry. Perhaps I'm grasping at any possibility. Any straw. But you have to understand. . . ."

He smiled. "Like a moth twisting on the pin."

He walked to the large chair and sat down. He puffed on his pipe with a contemplative expression.

"It's all right," he said softly. "Your trying to track it down like this. The fact that there is such confusion in the evidence, that there are so many possibilities, is in your favor."

"I don't want it that way. I want it straight."

"So do we all. But you got yourself into this. Nobody else."

"That's what I want to be sure about."

"The evidence looks sure. Damn sure."

His certainty was unmistakable. Earlier in the interview he had seemed willing to explore possibilities, to give me the benefit of doubt. Now, since the phone call, his attitude had shifted back.

There was no doubt, no further question.

"You've contacted your parents, of course?"

"No. I don't want to. Not until this thing is settled, one way or —"

"You ought to call them, you know."

This didn't make sense. It had no bearing on the question of the two deaths. It sounded more like an effort at making conversation. He didn't want to talk about the case itself, or my role in it.

I stood up. I told him I was sorry I had troubled him this way. "I'm afraid it hasn't helped too much to solve anything," I said. "But I appreciate —"

"It may have helped more than you imagine."

There was a knocking at the door. Farr called out, "Come in, please."

The door pushed open. Five men trooped into the room. I knew they were detectives. Three in plainclothes and two in uniform.

Farr said calmly, "Well — here he is."

I looked at them and back to him. He had known they were coming, that was the call he got. I said, "What's the joke? They could arrest me any time. I didn't make any attempt to —"

"No attempt to break from us," Farr

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said. "Except once — when you gave our men the slip in the subway. That was when you went over to Grand Central Station."

"You knew all about that?"

"Yamada informed us. He also presented us with that gun you picked up."

The detectives and policemen were crowding around me. One policeman had drawn his automatic from the holster.

I said, "You can put the gun up. I'm not armed and I'm not planning to put up any resistance. I just don't get the point of this. Why they should rush over here —"

"That phone call," Farr said. "Yamada told them at Headquarters that you were here. They were checking to make sure you didn't try to get away — early."

"But why? What reason, all of a sudden —"

One of the detectives said, "No point in not telling him. It's that gun you had in the shoe box, Marshall. Serial numbers been burned off it with acid. But you had it. You turned it over to Yamada with some kind of cock-and-bull story."

"Sure I gave him the gun myself. Do you think I'd be stupid enough to do that if I had —"

"Why you done it — that's your business. And it don't matter. You gave it to Yamada and he turned it over to us. Our ballistics bureau don't make mistakes. It happens to be the weapon that killed Captain Curtis."

Farr was standing by the easy chair. His large, heavy figure was silhouetted against the window. He towered there like a giant looking down at me. I couldn't see his face. But I knew his thoughts.

The gun I had — the gun that had been in my possession — was the death gun. They didn't need any more evidence now. They had their case cold.

It wasn't really news. I had known it was the gun. Known it instinctively the moment I had seen it.

Spike had said he wouldn't turn it in. Not yet, anyway, he'd promised. Spike would hold it in his own possession, until the thing was clearer. But he hadn't. He'd lied. He'd turned it over to McCormick.

I'd put my trust in Spike. I'd had to. There wasn't anyone else to whom I could turn. It was the gamble you took because there wasn't any other play to make.

It was a sucker's game. You were sold out before you put down your chips.

Two cops had their hands on my arms. A plainclothes man said, "Let's get going. We got to book him down at Headquarters. Somebody must have tipped off the reporters. They're waiting there already." He grinned at me. "Anyway — you'll get your picture in the paper."

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CHAPTER FIFTEEN

I HEARD the clacking footsteps of the guard in the corridor outside.

For three hours I'd been alone in that cell. This time they weren't holding me on suspicion. The charge was first degree murder. They'd brought me over from Headquarters to the New Tombs in a patrol car, under guard.

So you lose. You're caught in quicksands. The more you squirm, the more it sucks you down.

You killed a man. You don't remember, but it was your own hands. . . .

The clacking footsteps stopped. The guard was standing at the door. He had a silly grin.

"You got somebody to see you, Marshall."

"Reporter? Wants to write my life story? All about how it feels to be a killer?"

"Not this time. Just a dame. Claims she's your wife. You got a wife?"

Claims she's your wife. The guard had a smirk on his lips. I felt my hands close into fists. But it wasn't any good to lose your temper. I said, "Sure — why not? Even guys like me get married. I think —"

He laughed. "Can't nobody be sure but you. She's outside in the visitor's room. It's past regular visiting hours. She got special permission."

He was unlocking the door.

She was waiting there, seated on the other side of the table, with the steel wire mesh between us. She was wearing the floppy gray hat and the gray suit. When I came in she looked up. Her face was pale and her blue eyes wide.

"Hello, Johnny."

I sat down opposite her. I wished she wasn't so lovely. I said, "What did you come here for, Carol? Why are you trying to mix into it?"

"I talked to Lieutenant Yamada. He gave me — told me — everything that's happened."

"Spike called you?"

"Spike? Oh — yes. He came to see me. He said he'd taken a gamble you wouldn't understand. Said he'd turned that gun into the ballistics bureau because he'd been convinced it would prove not to be the gun that killed Curtis."

"That's a hot explanation!"

"Johnny — that's the truth. They were only supposed to make a checkup and make their report to him. They didn't. They turned it over to Lieutenant McCormick."

"Sounds like a neat bit of buck passing."

"But it isn't. He — your friend Spike — he didn't even know about it until they called him today to find out where you were. He told them you were over talking to a man named Farr."

If she was right — if it were the truth — then it hadn't been a double cross.

Spike had been working for me, trying to prove that automatic wasn't the death gun. He'd have had tangible evidence that the case against me was a frame. Only it didn't work out that way.

He'd been trying to help. That was what she said. Maybe. Even if he were trying, he couldn't help. I'd found that out. The facts themselves trampled you down.

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"He sent you here, didn't he? Sent you to explain?"

"He asked me to tell you about it. But that wasn't why I came here."

"It couldn't be — anything personal?"

"No. There's nothing personal between us now, Johnny. It just isn't that way. We're like two people who never knew each other."

"He said it was your duty, didn't he? Told you it was your responsibility? I'll bet on that one."

"In a way, yes. I feel —"

"I know what you feel, Carol. You didn't ask for any of this. You're not really a part of it. But you don't want it on your conscience that you ran out — that you didn't even try to help."

"That's a harsh way of putting it. But I suppose you're right."

I said, "I appreciate it. Appreciate your making the try. But it's no go. You're getting the marriage cancelled. You'll be finished with it. That's the way it should be."

"I didn't come just to make a try at cheering you up. I had another reason."

"About this case?"

"It was something I forgot. Just forgot completely until today when I talked to Spike. Then it popped back into my thoughts. It was one night — at the apartment."

"Your apartment?"

"You were pacing up and down in the drawing room. I came into the room. I heard you say something. I didn't understand. It was something like, 'I saw him before. I saw him out there. I saw him —'"

"I said that to you?"

"To yourself, Johnny. You didn't even know I was there. Then you saw me and stopped. When I asked what it was about you laughed and said for me to forget it."

I didn't know what it could mean. Somebody I'd seen over here — whom I knew out there in the Pacific. It could be a lead. But the chances were it was another of those dead end roads Spike talked about.

I tried to thank her. "It may be important, Carol. Or it may mean nothing at all. I don't know. I have to think it out. But I'm glad you told me. I'm glad of this chance to talk with you. Only now —"

"You want me to keep clear. The way you warned me that day in the apartment."

"When the thing began, Carol, I was willing to try anything. I thought I could fight it through. Now I think different."

"You think you're licked, don't you? Beaten."

"There's a blight on it," I said angrily. "A kind of curse. Whatever I touch withers. I got you into this. I want you out of it. There's enough wreckage."

"We're not the same people we were," she said. "Not the same two who ran off and got married and talked about a lot of crazy things. We could be two strangers meeting on the street. But you need help. I'm just an accident, you might say. It just happens."

"Forget it. It's wrong. It's no good. You have to understand that."

She was drawing on the gray gloves. "I think I do understand."

I said, "I want you to know one thing. I hate the guy they called Johnny Wilson. But I know why he fell for you. I'm sorry — do you see? I'm not that

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guy. That's why it's better if you stay clear."

"I know." She tried to smile. "Aunt Edna told me that too. She won't even talk about it any more. You and she are both right. Of course, you're right. It's better. . . ."

She was standing, looking at me. She said, "If there is ever anything, let me know, Johnny."

I said, "Sure. Thanks. Thanks a million."

For an instant the blue eyes looked into mine. Then she turned and started through the door.

McCormick paid me a call that night. Dropped in for a little talk. He tossed his coat and hat on the bunk and sat down.

He was tired. The buoyancy was gone. He said, "This time it's a little different. The case is pretty well tied up."

"Tied up enough," I said. "What do you want now?"

"You could still make things easier for yourself, Marshall. Also for us."

"I see. I'm supposed to pour out a full confession."

"That's right. Why not try playing ball with us? Spill the stuff out. It might mean better treatment. You gain nothing taking the rap alone."

"You don't even admit the possibility I might be telling the truth. That my mind did crack up. That I actually don't remember what happened."

"Fortunately, now we have the evidence we need. Proof that the man was killed by an automatic. That you were at the scene at the time of the crime. That the death gun was in your possession."

"You mean you've got somebody to pin it on. That's all that counts. You're not interested in what lies behind it — in getting the full story."

"But we are. In fact, I came over here hoping you were ready to tell it to me. A number of answers we haven't found. We know there are other persons involved. Some kind of dope ring. Still —"

"Why not start hunting them down? You must have the local cokies pretty well tagged."

"We've made arrests. Got some weird stories. But facts about this case — no. They shut up tight."

"But they must know. Some of them —"

"They're not talking. They're frightened." He paused. "Again, to be frank, we're not sure about motive. Captain Curtis was known as a taciturn man. Often he would conduct his investigations completely on his own, not telling anyone until he was ready to show his hand."

"I never even knew him," I said. "Never even saw him. It was only that letter I got —"

"He had some reason for wanting to see you. We don't know what it was. But it may have jeopardized you. That's the most logical explanation. I admit, we're not certain."

"Apparently, you don't need motive to put a man on trial for his life."

"Not with the physical evidence we already have. Reconstructing the case, we know there had to be some violent dispute between you and Captain Curtis in that room. You were carying a loaded weapon — evidence of premeditation. You drew it, fired —"

I could see a district attorney playing

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that before a jury. Reconstruction of the crime by police experts. It would sound real and convincing.

"I talked to your parents a little while ago, Marshall."

My parents. They'd be in it now. Their names smeared all over the papers. And it would drag on for weeks.

"Your mother's still sick. But they're flying East. Tomorrow night or the morning after that. Soon as they can make arrangements. I tried to get them to delay it a few days, until the story dies down. Be easier for them. But—"

"They believe I'm guilty too?"

"You don't deserve the kind of parents you've got, Marshall. They don't know if you're guilty or not. But they're sticking with you. They're coming East to get the best lawyer they can."

They'd believe me. They'd fight for me. But I wished they'd stay out of it. There wasn't anything they could do, any way they could help.

For some minutes he sat there, smoking in silence. His face was gaunt. I found myself wondering what he was thinking and feeling beneath that cold professional exterior.

"You think you've got the evidence you need," I said. "But half of it is theory, half of it what you call reconstruction of the case. That's supposition, even if it is by experts."

"We've got the gun. And — I think I forgot to mention — we've got that sound recording, Marshall. Lieutenant Yamada turned that in too. He should have turned them both in immediately. However, since he finally—"

Spike had turned in that recording too. Turned both of them in. Just at the moment when it could do me most harm.

McCormick, watching me, shook his head. "You're wrong. Yamada was actually trying to help you. He was sure the gun would prove not to be the death gun. And he told me he'd become convinced the recording was a fake. That it was proof they were trying to frame you."

Spike trying to help. Trying to get me clear out from under by those two pieces of evidence. Convinced the gun wasn't the murder gun. Convinced the film track was a phony. Convinced they were both nothing more than plants.

Why hadn't he told me he was doing it?

"You see he was wrong about the gun," McCormick said. "About the sound film — I can't say. It could be a fake. But it might not. In any event it is another piece of evidence we can offer when the case comes up."

He seemed to relax, as if reassured by his own statements. He said, "I gave your — your wife permission to visit you. Couldn't see any harm in it. What did she want, Marshall?"

From his tone, he might have been asking about a casual call from a next door neighbor. I told him about it. Told him her story of my talking about somebody I knew — somebody I'd seen before — out in the Pacific.

"You admit," I said, "there is plenty about this case you don't know. Even with all your evidence there's a big chunk missing from the picture. Isn't it just possible that the missing fragment could change the whole meaning of the evidence you have?"

"I'm afraid I haven't much time to

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worry about missing fragments. I can't sweep aside evidence because I might later find something that disproves it. My job is to take action on whatever facts we have."

"Even though you yourself may realize that the evidence — the case — isn't complete?"

"I may know a man is guilty and not be able to arrest him. I may believe a man's innocent and have to put him on trial. It isn't a personal matter. Collect evidence. Take the suspect into custody. Bring him into court. There, it's the judge and jury —"

"You try to put the best face you can on that evidence, don't you? You stretch it if you have to. You want the record to look good."

"That's normal. It's a business. You can't get too sentimental."

"But you're playing with lives. You've got to look at every angle. You've at least got to try."

"We attempt to prevent any miscarriage of justice, Marshall. In this case, that worry isn't costing me any sleep."

For hours I'd been thinking about the case. Hours alone in that cell. Examining every possibility. Trying to look at it from every side. Going over in my thoughts everything we knew and didn't know.

"Suppose you're wrong," I said. "Suppose, just for instance, I didn't kill Curtis. Wouldn't your evidence then take on different shape and meaning? Wouldn't these same facts —"

"We're not a debating society, Marshall. We're a police department. We deal in proof, not speculation."

"But you know there must be others involved. So there must be somebody running the show. Somebody who heads up the crowd. The boss. That couldn't be me. I've been in the hospital. The day Curtis was killed — I'd just gotten out that morning. You couldn't imagine —"

"We've never figured you as the ringleader. Although you may know more about his identity than you admit. We do know, all the evidence indicates, the gang deals in narcotics. It also appears to have remote contacts with the Orient. In all likelihood that's where you first tied in with them."

Contacts with the Orient. That might account for Carol's story about my telling her I'd seen him out there.

One name hovered in the back of my mind — Downes! He was the dope king of the East. He was the one people out there talked about. But nobody had located him since the war's end. The reports had it he was dead.

"Consider what happens," I said, "if my story is all straight, if I weren't tied in with some gang I contacted overseas. In that case, certain facts are pretty plain. For instance, somebody else would have to have been in that room the day Curtis was killed. I'd just gotten out of the hospital. I wouldn't have had time to tie up with any gang."

He had lit another cigarette and was leaning back against the wall, watching the smoke from the cigarette drift up toward the ceiling.

"Whoever this other person was," I told him, "he might have been there before I arrived. Or he could have come in later. He might have been a guest."

"We checked all the guests in the hotel," McCormick said quietly. "There had been several overnight transients on that floor but they checked out

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earlier that day. None of those on the floor at that time, or in the hotel, as a matter of fact, were in any way suspicious."

"I don't know who he was or how he got in. But if we assume I didn't kill Curtis, this other man has to be there. And he has to fire the bullet. Maybe I tried to stop him. There was a struggle and he struck me down. That could account for my loss of memory.

"It could account, too, for my fingerprints being on the wallet. It could have fallen to the floor when Curtis fell. Then if this man attacked me, too, I may have fallen, my hand clutching the wallet for an instant."

"It's a fascinating pastime you've got," McCormick commented. "Dreaming up what might have happened. But this man of yours is a myth."

"The man has his getaway planned," I kept on. "Down that fire escape ladder into the back alley. Probably he intended leaving the gun in the room. But I don't give him time. I'm not as stunned as I should have been. I follow him into the hallway, down to the street. But I'm too dazed to go on. And the murderer himself —"

"I suppose your idea is, the gentleman just walked off into the crowd?"

I could see his lips curl with derision. I said, "I've done plenty of thinking about it. You've got to admit all of this has to follow, if you assume I'm innocent."

"*If* you assume!"

In spite of his sarcasm, he was listening. I said, "He's free then. He's made his escape. And he's got his tieups with the dope racket. Maybe he has narcotics in his possession. Maybe he's trying to get rid of them. He uses people like Michaels and that girl Evie, addicts themselves, to make outside contacts and sales.

"Only he doesn't know what's happened to me. That would have him frightened. He'd be trying to find out. Trying to locate me. He'd want to keep tabs on me and what I was doing.

"Then he spots that picture of me and Carol in the paper. Evie told me that. The police don't know what I look like; they haven't any recent pictures. He knows, all right. He'd remember, too, because I was witness to the murder.

"He can't be certain. But he's pretty sure it's me or a reasonable facsimile of same. He sends Evie to investigate. Sends her to stage a pickup. He wants the score. Once Evie and I get drinking together he hangs around one of those bars, stays in the background, gets a close look. Then he's sure."

McCormick didn't interrupt. But I could see disbelief in his expression. He was letting me talk, letting me ramble on. Perhaps I'd make a slip — perhaps reveal how much more I knew than I was admitting.

I was trying to follow the twisting road in my thoughts. "He's certain now I'm the one. But he can't be certain what it means. Evie told me they knew my real name. The only place he could have learned it was that day at the hotel. But now I was using the name Johnny Wilson. From what I tell Evie, he knows I've either blacked out and don't remember or I'm playing some game.

"He still has the gun. He could drop it in the river. But he has a better idea. He checks the gun at Grand Central Station, gets Evie to slip me the stub, in

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my pocket. I haven't yet walked out on Carol for keeps. So, later, I drop the check in the bureau drawer at Carol's apartment. I don't know where it came from. I forget about it.

"The guy's still scared. Johnny Wilson might recover. Might remember. Even though I've got the check for the gun I'm still a hazard. He's got to destroy me. So he hires gunmen — thugs. They take a shot at me, but Evie's given me the warning. I told you that — all about what she told me up in the room."

"I recall what you've told me, Marshall." He sounded annoyed, as though he didn't like to admit the logic of the picture I was outlining.

"I almost walk into the trap. But I remember what Evie said. So I'm on guard. I manage to duck in time. I get that grazing wound in my shoulder. And those gunmen decide not to wait around. They clear out fast.

"But I'm wounded. I wander around the city. I don't know where I'm headed, or why. And this thing shocks back my memory. That's the turning point. This Mr. X of mine — once he learns what happens to me — knows he has to change his plans. But luck's still riding with him. I can't remember anything about that day Curtis was killed.

"That's the setup. The perfect frame. Make me convict myself. All the evidence points to me. He can just sit back and watch the sport.

"You — the police — pull me in. You don't believe my story. But you let me out. You say it was because you didn't have enough evidence. But the fact is —"

"You're right on that, anyway," McCormick said. "I wanted you to lead me to the others. You did lead us to Michaels and the dead girl, Evie. We know that isn't all of them. We're still working to get the rest. But this flight of imagination you're on —"

"If he — this creature — does exist," I said, "what happens when he learns you've let me out? Then he gets really worried. He doesn't know what's happened about the gun. I may even have lost that stub. What he wants is a clincher. Some piece of evidence against me so strong you couldn't doubt it.

"So he tries that recording. The one Spike turned over to you. You yourself say that could be faked. If I didn't commit the crime, it has to be a fake. And it was planted on me. I know that for sure. Michaels brought it to me. Sure, they could tip you off I had it. They'd delivered it themselves.

"All right. If the recording is phoney, how was the thing managed? There aren't many of those dictaphones on the civilian market so far. That means the man would have to be — or is likely to be — someone who has easy access to those machines. And someone who knows how to handle sound recording.

"He and some pal get hold of the machine. They fake the record. They make it sound badly scratched. Voices hard to understand. Then they get it to me, tipping you off on the side."

"It's all beautiful, Marshall. But we get stories every day like this one you're spinning. Every cheap crook has an alibi, even when he's caught red-handed."

"But I couldn't have killed Evie, could I? You know that. You know it because the cops know I was in my room that forenoon."

"On that point your story stands up.

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Particularly since Yamada told us how that night he had gone up to your tenement to ask you questions and ran into you as you were trying to duck out."

"He — told you that?"

"Certainly. He told us how you'd gone down to the loft building to find out what was on the sound track."

There was that much, anyway. Spike hadn't mentioned I'd broken into the place, that he hadn't come in until later. And it was a point too trivial for them to check.

Not that it mattered. I had my alibi on Evie. She was killed sometime during the forenoon and I was in my room during those hours.

"Somebody killed her," I told him. "Even if she gave herself the first shot of dope. Or even the second. According to the reports, the second shot at least would have knocked her out. Somebody had to give her the last one. The one that killed her.

"Whoever that was, it couldn't be me. You've agreed to that. But it could be this same mythical creature. And he had plenty of reason for wanting to get rid of her.

"He's afraid of Evie. She knows about him. And it begins to look like she's falling for me and she might talk. So he has to take care of her. They get her — probably at night — up to the old man's house.

"The old man can't be the guy. He's just a stooge. But he might have given Evie that final shot of dope. And he probably knows the answers. Only he's out of his mind. Or putting on a great act. Or anyway you can't get a word of sense out of him. So that leads nowhere."

"It might all be true, Marshall. Every word. But, you see, there's nothing tangible. If you had the slightest notion who this mythical creature is, that could make a difference."

"If I knew who he was, I'd tell you, wouldn't I? I wouldn't be talking like this, and still holding back the one thing —"

"This whole theory of yours could be merely an attempt to throw us off the track. To cover up for people outside. Or it might be what it seems — unbridled speculation. I can't very well put a puff of smoke on trial for murder. Until you get someone more solid. . . ."

He was standing up, putting on his coat. "The way you talk," he said, "your being in the case is purely fortuitous. You just happened to be there. But it isn't that way. Curtis sent for you. You claim you don't know why. But he had to have some reason."

"Some reason, sure, that's part of what we don't know. Part of the missing fragment that might change the meaning. It might —"

"We checked into it. Day before his death, Curtis made a long distance call to a Colonel at the Pentagon Building and learned the addresses of a number of men in your former outfit. Your address he seemed particularly anxious to get, and he sounded excited when he learned you were at Halloran."

"He didn't give the Colonel any idea what it was all about — why he wanted those addresses?"

"None at all. The Colonel was an old friend. He knew Captain Curtis was frequently involved in confidential government matters. So the Colonel didn't ask questions. He simply provided the information the Captian desired."

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He was at the door. I could tell he was glad to be getting away from there. Away from this probing of possibilities that might prove he was wrong.

"There may be something in your theory of the missing fragment," he said coldly. "But you'd need facts. Realities. Proof. As it is, we have our proof—enough to obtain your conviction. We'd like more. We'd like the whole story. But with what we've got—"

He broke off, shrugged his shoulders. "Sorry. Get facts to back up those daydreams and we might listen. Otherwise, I'm afraid—"

The guard was letting him out through the door, closing and locking it again when McCormick was in the corridor outside.

Go and catch yourself a missing fragment. We don't know what it might be. We haven't any idea where to start looking. But it might help. It might provide the answers.

Faces danced before you in the darkness. Carol. Carol with that smile. With those large, terribly innocent eyes. And Aunt Edna, with that fluffiness.

Evie. The tired little blonde. Evie who thought she was in love with me. Who'd tried to warn me when she thought I was in danger.

I was alone in there. They'd put me in a special cell, off to myself. I was the only one in the prison waiting arraignment on a first degree murder charge. They had to keep me from the others.

It was a bewildering parade in my mind. These people I didn't know. McCormick with his smooth voice. Farr with his righteous anger.

Spike. Spike who said he was my friend. Who said he believed me. But he'd turned in that sound recording and the gun.

McCormick said it was because Spike wanted to help me. Because he thought he could show I was innocent that way.

Maybe. . . .

The old man. The old man with his demented words. *I know you . . . you're to be Queen of the May. . . .*

It seemed hours I tossed on that bunk. I didn't want to think and I couldn't stop thinking. I thought it must be long after midnight. But the hands on my watch said quarter to ten.

Go back to the beginning of it. Back to where it started.

The jaunt to China. The day I'd stood outside that shack. The man and the girl inside. It had all happened in a few seconds. Your whole life spun on moments like that.

I seemed to feel now the same icy horror I knew in that instant when he dragged her before him—when my bullet splattered into her body.

That was the moment. It was from that second on. I hadn't meant to snuff out her life. I hadn't dreamed it was possible I could miss.

He'd been too quick. So I stood there. Stood there like a scared kid. One moment off guard. But that was long enough for him.

I could see the hand raising and I couldn't move. Could see the clownish, replusive silhouette in the window. The one instant . . . the flash. . . .

The elusive Mr. Downes. The Chinese girl had lured him to that shack. But I'd muffed the job. I'd missed. And the girl had died.

I hadn't seen his face. He was only a silhouette in the window. Towering and ugly.

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I'd never seen him before. Yet now — as the picture crossed my thoughts — the silhouette seemed familiar. It struck a chord. Somewhere — somehow —

And I remembered.

It couldn't be. It simply couldn't be.

But I knew it was right. I knew it in that instant. I went back in my thoughts. Back to that afternoon in the hotel room. Farr and I, talking. The phone ringing. And a few minutes later, detectives bursting into the room.

He'd known they were coming. He was waiting, holding me there with his words, ready to turn me over.

This was the final moment. The instant of triumph for him, because now they were taking me out, now they had the proof they needed.

He had been standing in front of that window. Silhouetted there. Towering. Looking down at me. Vividly in my mind I could see that repulsive, clown-like profile.

Silhouetted, just as Downes had been, in that window. . . .

I couldn't mistake on that. Those two silhouettes were etched deep in my brain. They stood out like black symbols.

Only they weren't two silhouettes. They weren't two at all. They were the same. The same outlines. The same clownish features.

Sam Downes!

In the darkness I knew. In the darkness they merged together. Merged like shadows of evil. Ten thousand miles apart yet they moved together.

There wasn't such a man as Farr. Not here in the United States. The creature who said he was Farr was Sam Downes. The dope salesman from the East. The man who played ball with the Japs.

The man I'd been assigned to destroy. . . .

It was a frame. The whole damn show. Framed by Downes. By the twisted cunning he brought out of Asia. He was sitting here. Sitting here in their laps. And they hadn't known.

I was at the door, calling to the guard. I had to see McCormick. I had to see him now. Tell him I was ready to talk, to spill my guts. Tell him anything but get him here.

I was ready to talk, all right. Ready to tell him the missing fragment was found.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

In my pocket was a loaded .38 revolver. Spike lent it to me on his own. Took that last gamble because he was sure he was right about me.

McCormick and the others hadn't been sure. But they knew they didn't have all the answers. Even McCormick had to admit I could be right. And he knew if I were — it could knock over his whole case.

Farr had been in prison four years. Solitary confinement. Nobody had seen him. It was possible this wasn't the man. So possible, they were willing to let me try to find out.

I asked them for the chance. His

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guard would be up if they sent a detective. But I could put on an act. I could pretend I'd busted out of jail. I could trick him into talking.

They agreed to it finally. But they wouldn't have given me a gun. I was on the way over to the hotel with Spike when he said he'd lend me his revolver. "You don't know what the guy may try," he told me. "You can't go in there alone — with nothing."

I put the gun in my pocket. I said, "Thanks, Spike. It'll help plenty. Because I'm pulling this show — my own way."

I didn't send up word. I went on up to the room and pounded on the door.

He was in a dark suit. He saw the automatic in my hand and stepped back. "Have you gone crazy? Just —"

I grinned. I said, "Hello, Mr. Farr. I just busted out of jail."

"You — you escaped?"

"Think I'm going to let them railroad me for a murder I didn't do?"

"The police will follow you. You don't imagine —"

"I've got time to pay off one bad debt."

"A bad — debt?"

I'd made one check that morning. In his first weeks of imprisonment, Farr had been contacted twice by outside guerrillas. That meant they had to give him the recognition phrase. It was a kind of password he could call for in his challenge to others who might come to him claiming to be from the underground.

The phrase was *hsia yu*. "Heavy rains." The Chinese symbol. The symbol I'd had in my room. It was something no man could forget if he'd been a prisoner. Words he would cling to because of their meaning.

"Suppose you're in prison," I said. "Someone near you mutters a phrase — in Chinese. *Hsia yu*. What would it mean?"

"*Hsia yu*? I suppose — if you've pronounced it right — it means rains. Big rains."

"Is that all?"

"Why, yes. What else could it — unless — there were something —"

He was floundering. Knowing just a second too late it had special meaning. "What else —"

I laughed. Farr would have known. The real Farr couldn't have failed to remember. You don't forget phrases on which may hang life and freedom.

I hadn't needed it. I'd been certain. It was a final check. He'd walked into the trap himself, without realizing.

"You're not Farr," I said. "You're Sam Downes. You see, I came here for a particular pleasure. Keep your hands up. Keep 'em —"

Under that yellowish tinge, I could see him pale. "You can't get away with this, Marshall —"

"You won't know. You'll be dead. Deader than hell."

I pulled back the pin. The gun was ready to fire. He stared into the muzzle. "You want me to talk with a gun in my guts. You plan to kill me —"

"But we could," I told him, "make a deal."

"A deal? What kind — what sort?"

"I want in. In on the dope racket you're starting here in the States. I know about it. I'm the only one who does know. If you want to play ball —"

Sweat on his forehead. Somebody else had the drop on him. Somebody else

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had a bullet to put in his brain this time.

"You want — in?" hoarsely. "You want partnership — with me?"

"I could turn you over to the cops. I got enough to know I'm right. So you'll cut me in. And you'll talk. Because if you don't —"

He was trapped. Trapped by the sudden death I held in my hand. Trapped because he thought I was making a getaway. Because he thought the police were hunting me down. Because I had nothing to lose.

"You killed Curtis," I said. "Killed him because you had to. He was the one who would know."

He stood in the center of the room, hands above his head, glaring at me like a wooden dummy.

"I'm giving you a chance," I said. "I'm counting to fifteen. A long count. Then — I'm finishing a job I once muffed."

I started to count. Slowly. Deliberately.

He let me get half way through. The baby blue eyes were wide with terror. Then he stopped me. He cried out, "Wait! Wait a minute! Perhaps — perhaps we can — how much do you want —"

"Like I said," I told him. "Fifty-fifty. And facts. Facts I can hold over your rotten head."

Glinting light in his eyes. I could read his thoughts. Maybe there was still a chance. If he stalled for time.

Stalled long enough to figure out a break. . . .

"You're smart, Marshall. Keen. I don't presume to match younger wit. As you say, we might make a deal. A deal for mutual advantage. . . ."

So he talked. Talked for time. Talked at the point of a gun.

Farr was dead. Died in solitary confinement in a Jap prison.

"He'd worked for Curtis," Downes said. "Undercover man. Volunteer. Not actually part of the Navy. No pictures or prints on file in Washington. It was a personal setup between him and Curtis. Farr's idea of playing patriot.

"Chinese in the villages — they were Farr's world. He didn't know many whites. Except for a few scattered individuals, no one of importance — no one but Curtis — would remember. And he was tall like I am. Graying — like me — at the edges."

Downes had always worked alone. He dealt with many in the underworld of the East, yet few knew him by sight. When the Japs came in, they used his talents. He and his narcotic deals helped in pacifying Chinese resistance.

Then the war ended. Downes would be a war criminal. Could be tried and hanged. He had to get out.

"But I still had the weapon — drugs. A personal supply of narcotics worth a million. It's with me now. I'm disposing of it. I — we — can sell what remains. Then — Mexico. South America."

He'd known Farr was dead. Beaten to death by Jap guards. Downes bribed those guards. "I got Farr's papers. His clothes. Everything I needed to prove I was Farr."

This was the gamble. A last spin with the chips down. Final play for his own hide. For a fortune. Escape.

Curtis, in New York, was told Farr had been found and released. He sent word to give his former undercover man transport to the States, if he desired. Farr — American son of Ameri-

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can missionaries — would need no passport.

"The obvious way," Downes said. "The way nobody ever bothers to suspect."

The guards who released him stated he was Farr. There was nothing to indicate otherwise. The past was buried in the ruins.

He flew to the States in a Liberator with a crew of kids going home. Authorities were still lax checking on incoming military personnel. It played into Downes' hand.

He had papers to show he was Farr. But no one questioned him. No customs. No immigration officials. For all anyone knew, he was part of the bomber crew, homeward bound.

"I did talk to some Navy Intelligence people when we got to Chicago. That was as far as the bomber boys went. I was scheduled to wait for transport to New York on an Army C-47. Curtis learned I'd arrived, where I was stopping. He called me long distance.

"He got suspicious toward the end of the call. I knew by the way he began asking sharper questions. I gambled he'd play his suspicions close. Wait until you're sure — that's how he worked. But I had to move fast.

"I was right. He'd made a wild stab at the truth. In all China there was just one white man daring enough to conceive a masquerade like this. The man they'd never been able to find. The man who walked under their noses and they couldn't see. Me. Sam Downes.

"He didn't figure I knew he suspected. He thought I would stay in Chicago a few days at least, thinking myself safe, not attempting any immediate getaway. He kept his own council. Checked his files of past reports. Called Washington for names of men who had been in on that landing where you tried to kill me, men who might have had a glimpse of me within the year. He got a break. You were in Halloran. You were getting out in a day or two. So he sent you that note to come and see him.

"I had to play it quick — and smart. I went to a downtown travel agency in Chicago, flashed a fifty dollar bill. They got me plane tickets that night, round trip to New York and back."

By phone call, when he hit New York, he got Curtis' room number. He already had the address; Curtis had mentioned it in the first part of that long distance call.

"I went up there. It's an old-fashioned place. But too expensive for the cheap mob. It wasn't too crowded. I got my room without much trouble, on the same floor with Curtis. Call it fortune, or misfortune, perhaps."

He kept his own door opened. Curtis didn't have many visitors. Downes wanted someone on whom to shove the guilt. Someone to keep police from searching further.

He heard me show up. Curtis opened the door. I'd explained who I was.

This was the moment. Downes went to Curtis' room. He stood outside. Inside, Curtis was asking about the episode in China. Had I seen Downes? Would I know him again?

His suspicion, Downes heard him say, had been growing since that phone call. Now he felt he had to act. That afternoon he would call Chicago again — this time Navy District Headquarters — to have operatives assigned to watch every move made by the man who said he was Farr.

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But Downes hadn't waited. He knocked. Curtis himself opened the door.

One bullet at close range, a silencer on the gun. Then Downes brought the butt of the gun down on my head. He wanted to stun me momentarily, leave me there with the death weapon in my hands.

Instead, I made a dive for him. He fled, down that fire escape to the alley and out to the street. Dazed, I tried to follow.

"I stopped on the far side of the street," Downes said. "I could see your reflection in a store window. You were standing across the street. Holding your crushed hat in your hand. You looked as if you didn't realize where you were."

Downes had heard enough to know I'd just gotten out of the hospital. He began to guess what was happening, what the blow on my head had done. Slowly — cautiously — he started walking toward me.

"You stood there. No sign of recognition. I came closer and closer. Your eyes looked vacant. I walked up to you. Asked you for a light. You mumbled something, staggered away."

When he'd arrived the previous night at the Park Towers, he'd paid in advance. He'd checked out about eleven o'clock the next morning. But he hadn't actually left the hotel. He'd gone back to the room, waited around. No one bothered him. New guests wouldn't be coming in until later that afternoon.

After he fled to the street he didn't return to the Towers. He took a bus to LaGuardia Field, waited to board his plane to Chicago.

He used assumed names throughout. At the Towers, no one connected him with the murder. Simply an overnight guest who checked out several hours before the crime. Back in Chicago, he was staying at a large commercial hotel. No one missed him.

He came East a week later. Everyone accepted him as Farr.

From the hotel where we were now, he launched the narcotic deals. He'd made contacts. Old-timers he'd dealt with back before the war. Men who'd brought his supplies from China. Michaels and Evie were drawn in — dope itself held them in his power. The old man's house was the perfect drop. Meetings with "clients" were always held late at night.

"Michaels bought a second hand car with my money. Sometimes we used it. Mostly we went there late at night on foot."

Navy people kept him informed about the hunt for me. I was his main worry. Then he spotted that picture in the paper. He sent Evie to investigate. Eventually, she got me out of that apartment, got me where he could watch me.

He hired his gunmen, made that attempt on my life. It backfired — proved a shock treatment for my mind. But he was still in luck. I didn't recall anything about that day at the hotel. It looked like the frameup would still work.

But McCormick seemed uncertain. McCormick let me out. Downes got panicky. He wanted some piece of evidence that would make me — and through me, McCormick — sure of guilt.

That was his blunder. With his contacts at the Navy, he obtained one of those recorders without any fuss. He

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and Michaels staged it. Michaels playing Curtis — Downes imitating me. He knew me now — knew my voice. He didn't do it obviously. He made the record scratched, the voices hard to hear.

Evie hadn't been difficult. He'd taken her in the car. Given her a shot of morphine. Then driven her through the night to the old man's home.

He made Michaels give her the last two injections during that next morning. "I told him the drug would help her," Downes said coldly. "I said she'd sing better when she awakened. She had ambitions to sing. She did have a job for a time, in some cheap bar."

His plan had been to bury her in quicklime in the basement of that withered house. But he hadn't had the chance.

Spike and I butted in too soon.

It wasn't a gang. It was one man.

He was the evil. The brains. Not caring for any human being but himself. This was the shape of his world here, as it had been in the Orient.

It was like listening to a play. You forgot where you were, why you were here. He must have seen it, realized that for one brief instant my guard was lowered.

He made a lunge for the gun. His hands were on my wrists. Hands like iron. The pain in my arm almost made me release the gun. But I held on; shoved him back against the wall.

There were people then. Others breaking into the room. The door behind me opening. He saw them. He gave me a push, made a dive for the window.

But it wasn't in time. They were on him. Four detectives, pulling him back, before he could cheat the law by taking his own life.

We had planned they would be out there — listening. But I hadn't realized how strong a contingent they would send.

I turned and saw in the doorway the unruffled, smiling Lieutenant McCormick.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

THE train would be leaving in a few minutes. I was going home. Home to the world I knew and wanted.

Spike had gotten the tickets. He'd advanced the money so my departure wouldn't be delayed longer. There wasn't anything holding me. All charges had been dropped. The slate was clean.

The mid-town police squad, after considerable search, had finally located my barracks bag at a cheap hotel on West 44th Street. I had checked it there the day I left the hospital. The baggage check was one of the items Evie destroyed. She realized it was something personal, tying me to my real world. So she'd torn it into a hundred pieces.

It was all there. My clothes. My papers. Also the automatic I'd bought

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while I was overseas. Sitting there, waiting for me.

I'd talked with my folks on the phone. Mom cried and Dad's voice sounded gruff. Nothing to worry about now. We'd forget this thing.

Spike stood beside me in the station, slouch hat pushed back on his head. He asked about Carol. Had I called her? Didn't I want to talk with her before I left?

I told him no. It would be best all around if I didn't.

"The family's having the marriage annulled," I said. "That's how it has to be. I wish it were different. But okay — it's finished. It's over. What Carol needs now —"

"You figure to let her forget it, don't you? You think that's everything she wants?"

"I still envy Johnny Wilson, Spike. But there's been enough wreckage. I told her that once. For her — everybody — the best deal is for me to walk out cold."

It was four minutes to five o'clock. Late afternoon crowds pushed past us. Four minutes more and the Limited would be pulling out.

I shook Spike's hand. I didn't try to thank him. You can't put it into words.

He walked to the gates with me. The porter carrying the barracks bag was telling me to hurry.

Spike said, "I'll look you up when I get to Ohio. Maybe we can find ourselves a couple of farmers' daughters."

I grinned at him and started through the gates.

Spike was sending me home in style. I had my own compartment. I followed the porter onto the train. He walked ahead, stowed away the baggage in the compartment. As he came out he smiled at someone inside and said, "Thank you, ma'am."

Thank you, ma'am!

I pushed open the compartment door.

Carol was there. She was settled back comfortably with her coat off and her luggage neatly stacked on the rack.

She didn't speak. There was that faint smile on her lips.

I said, "Carol, I — I don't understand. I'm going home —"

"I know," she told me. "I'm going with you, Johnny. Or do I call you Roy?"

Spike had known. He'd helped arrange it — he and Aunt Edna.

"I told them I wanted to be with you," Carol informed me. "I said I was still your wife, legally and actually, in spite of the fact you used a false name when we got married, in spite of anything Dad could say against you.

"Edna was against it too, at first. Then she saw I was in earnest and she said I was probably right about you and it sounded romantic and did I want her to help me pack? But it was Spike who really made up my mind. I wanted to be with you. Only I didn't know if you wanted me or not. But Spike said — he said —"

"Spike," I told her, "was very right."

It was curious to realize she was far more of a stranger to me than I was to her. But it didn't matter. Looking at her, seeing how lovely she was, I knew it didn't matter at all.

"There's just one thing," I said. "I'll never be quite sure which of us — me or that guy Johnny Wilson — is being slightly immoral."

She laughed. I sat down beside her.

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We talked a little. About my folks. About the farm. About the world we were heading for out there.

The train started with a jolt. Possibly it was just an accident but I found myself holding her in my arms. She looked up and then her lips brushed against mine.

The train wheels clicked faster and faster on their way home.

THE END

Look for the next Bestseller Mystery, coming soon — "Death for My Beloved," (originally published under the title "Enduring Old Charms"), by Doris Miles Disney. Abridged edition. "Real kick," says the Saturday Review of Literature.

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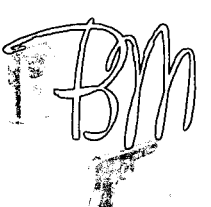
BULLETS FOR A BLONDE

When Roy Marshall came back to his senses he found himself on a jolting subway train. There was blood seeping through his shirt, and a gun in his pocket. More frightening was the gradual realization that he had lost four months out of his life—four months of which he could remember nothing. And then he found that the police had labeled him a murderer and were scouring the city for him. Roy knew he was not a killer, but he had no proof of his innocence, and he could find only two clues to his recent, violent past; a tawdry blonde who knew too many secrets, and a curious, haunting phrase which beat at his brain, seemed to warn him of unknown, terrible dangers still to be met....



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